

Alternate Past, Uncertain Future Mk II

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Summary: Co-written with aDarkOne History, a single event, can alter so much, let alone two. The San'Shyum are no more. The Krogan Empire stands strong. Humanity is now a giant among the stars. With three Galactic Superpowers in play, will an encounter see a new Golden Age, or an Era of War? (Chapters 1-12 being rewritten)

1. First Contact: Fire for Effect: Edited

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mark II

A/N: Alright everyone before we kick this story off. Let me say thanks again to Real Teagy SOT for letting me adopt his story. Also, for what may seem the longest time, the UNSC is going to basically curbstomp their way onto the galactic scene. That being said, it WON'T stay that way. Won't spoil it, but suffice it to say, when I said Galactic Superpowers, I meant it.

4/18/2014) Another massive edit/touch up to the chapter.

Prologue: Greed and Contact

Cerok System

Turian-Krogan Taskforce

Assignment: Patrol of Cerok System

At the far edge of Council space, a small fleet, consisting of a pair of dreadnoughts, one turian, the other krogan, surrounded by a small number of cruisers and frigates, patrolled the system. A rather impressive force, and one that certainly made a person question why all the firepower for a simple patrol.

The answer was simple, the Primary-Type Mass Relay. A previously inactive Mass Relay. Apparently the local race had activated the Relay, for some reason ignoring the, then already active,

Secondary-type relay. Least before they had blasted themselves back into a pre-industrial state on their homeworld.

Still, the fact that there was a new active Relay raised concern about a new race potentially coming through it. Or of the known pirate presence in the and nearby systems. Hence the task force assigned to watch it.

Enter Desolas Arterius. Turian rear-admiral of the Hierarchy, with a greedy disposition. Desolas had dedicated more than a good portion of his life to the Hierarchy. Having fought in more than a few battles against major slaver and pirate factions along with the occasional civil war and insurrection in both Hierarchy and Council space. He had shown a level of tactical brilliance seen in only a few every generation, utterly defeating his opponents, but with tactics that would befuddle many a tactician. Still, in terms of loyalty, it was well known his own people took precedent.

His record and service lead to his promotions and command of a dreadnought, The Obelisk of Turipa, named after a prominent general in ancient Turian history that was credited with creating the first of the turian empires. However, certain events later soured his image that the hierarchy tried to hide him from the galactic society at large.

Alongside the Obelisk was the krogan built Dreadnought, The Son of Kalros, commanded by his Krogan Counterpart: Captain Torsk, one of the most brutal krogan alive. Torsk possessed a fearsome reputation as a cunning and brutal tactician, having learned from his many experiences over the course of his eleven hundred year life. He had the skill and knowledge to formulate detailed and effective strategies but preferred what amounted to a head-on charge. However, his rapid tactical responses to the battlefield, barking out orders as he adapted to changing scenarios, meant he was still largely successful.

But unlike his Turian counterpart his brutality knows no bounds, in combat; he often used tactics that were seen as barbaric and unnecessary, ranging from scorched-earth tactics to en masse charges. Along with the rumors of what he allows those under his command to do with prisoners of any sort. Even among his own species, his brutality was outmatched by only a few. In fact it was more reminiscent of the brutality and bloodlust that drove the krogan to the brink of self-annihilation by nuclear fire.

The pair had been working together since Desolas had been promoted to Commander, often acting as liaison with the Krogan Admiral. Over the years the two came to complement each other perfectly. One was precise, disciplined and loyal. The other was blunt, brutal and fanatic. Where one of them would flank, the other would charge head on, catching their enemy in a pincer movement. This combination of polar opposite strategies meshed, against belief, into a near perfect form. And it is one that has yet to be replicated by another pair. And over the years, they had become among the best commanders, but were not the most recognized.

Torsk's own reputation had been his undoing. Despite his success, he was a scarcely known figure in Citadel space. As the Krogan do their best to hide his existence in order to dispel rumors of Krogan bloodlust. Having almost singlehandedly destroyed the Krogan People's

reputation as not only powerful but productive members of society. As for the Turian General, his reason for being out in the edges of Citadel space was simple: greed. His time with the Torsk essentially forced him to learn to be more harsh and clinical, the very reason for his success. And the same reason for his, relatively hidden, wealth. Each successive raid he committed against larger and larger pirate bands increased his own personal wealth, far beyond what the Turian Hierarchy paid its commanders. His hope was to find a hereto undiscovered alien species, conquer it, and then introduce it to the Citadel Council as a new Client race of the Turians like the Volus. One obscure fact about the Volus becoming a client race was that the Turian commander who led the initial, and later successful, campaign against the Volus, became among the richest of Turians, retiring to a life of luxury soon after his service. Even now his descendants still enjoyed their forefathers success.

Both had called in favors and pulled a few strings to get their fleets and their crews, assigned to watching the newly active Relay. as the Admiral was also in on Desolas's plan. Despite the lack of new species, their own coffers still expanded from the raids of pirate bases. So far all examinations and scans had turned up empty. No species had come through the relays, and they had already eliminated what pirates were in the nearby systems and plundered their bases. Now the pair waited for something, anything to happen. Hoping that something came through the Relay.

The only thing of note was the fact that the space around the only planet with natives that had almost destroyed itself was that its orbit was littered with floating wrecks and husks of ships. All of them sharing an overall design, that is to say heavy armor and ridiculous amounts of weaponry but with slightly different aesthetic groups, but none of them used Eezo. And the fact that, based on their analysis of some of the husks, there was a considerable difference in age; averaging around several hundred years or so between different aesthetic groups. Apparently this had been happening since before the Council had stumbled onto their system. The native species on the planet were a war-faring species and the Council kept a close on them should they ever become a true spacefaring species. A fear unwarranted considering their new current state.

General Arterius entered the Combat Information Centre or CIC on his ship, where he would command the Fleet he is in charge of. He walked up to the galaxy map and hit a few buttons. The Map changed from a view of the Galaxy to just one of the system in detail. It showed the star and its surrounding planets. The planets consisted of 2 planets in the habitable zone however both were desolate. There were also 2 large gas giants that were on the outer edge of the system. The other Primary mass relay was at the edge of the system, active and utterly unremarkable.

"What are the reports?" asked Desolas

One of the operators turned to Desolas.

"Sir, our scans show that whoever was in the system had left roughly a few days ago. The abandoned outposts still have signs of recent use." replied the Turian Operator

"Very well, keep up the standard procedure, get me Admiral Torsk on the line" ordered Desolas

The comms flared to life and a voice came over the speakers.

"General, what can I do for you?" asked a deep Krogan voice, clearly Admiral Torsk.

"Torsk, we will be sending men down to the planet. We shall both be searching the bases for any evidence of slavers or pirates. Understood?" informed Desolas

"Yes Desolas. My men are eager to fight. Send us the location and we shall be underway. Maybe you Turians might learn a thing or two about warfare from us" quipped Torsk.

"Well, if my men want to lose some brains cells to excessive head-butting I will point them in your direction." replied Desolas with laughter in his voice.

"Sir, we have a contact, unknown make and classification! Profiles do not, I repeat DO NOT, match any other known profiles! They are taking position next to the Relay!" shouted the Turian Operator.

"What!? I'm on way to the bridge! All ships, move to combat-ready status!" Desolas had already bolted for the bridge. The moment he arrived on the bridge, a video feed of said relay and over two dozen of the unknown vessels appeared on one of the screens. Ranging from freighter-tonnage vessels to what had to be frigate-tonnage. Most had a smooth slimmed profile, curved and sleek, with a litany of colors. One looked eerily similar to a hanar without tentacles. A few others were blocky, rough designs; a more utilitarian design. But one ship stood out among the rest. It was the size of a Council Dreadnought. The ship seemed bulky, as if function was meant to be its design and not form. And unlike the others, was painted jet-black. The ship, nor any of the others, were giving off any element zero readings but was having large energy spikes from their Reactors. "What are they doing?"

"Energy reading and Eezo levels spiking!" The Lieutenant manning the scanner station gasped. "They're trying to go back through the Relay" On screen everyone watched as the core of the Mass Relay began to glow a bright blue, the concentric rings beginning to spin faster, a tell-tale sign of an imminent Relay jump.

"Not on my watch. Link communications with the rest of the fleet!" He keyed the line to counterpart's, "Torsk coordinate with my ships and help me deal with these newcomers. We cannot afford another Rachni war" ordered Desolas. He only said this as he knew he was being recorded by the ship's black box. In reality, he was using this as justification to eventually pacify this new race.

Torsk's guttural laughter came over the comm. loud and proud, his excitement obvious. "You always get me into some good fights don't you Desolas? Very well, let's show them the might of the Council. The usual plan then." replied Torsk as he disengaged comms with Desolas. On the tactical display, the Son of Kalros and several frigates began to head on toward the alien vessels.

The biggest ship in the group, the dreadnought, turned away from the fleet, shielding the smaller vessels.

The screen blared red as it detected a magnetic energy spike from the dreadnought and several of the smaller vessels, who were also turning to face the Son of Kalros "Sir, they're readying weapons systems!" barked an Operator.

"Order all ships to target their Dreadnought. They can't be allowed to leave!" Desolas barked. They still had a chance, as it seemed these newcomers were either unsure or had no idea what they were doing and thus were slow to go back. 'More than likely it was the Relay's autonomous system doing it for them the first time.' Desolas mused. A few of the Primary Relays, upon first activation, when a ship approached them, would essentially seize control before launching it to the sister Relay.

On the tactical display, his fleet had moved to strike the enemy vessels from 'above', while Korsk's group was charging in. The alien vessels had moved into a wedge formation, the same as his fleet. However, unlike his, where they were attempting to stay clear out of another's line of fire, the aliens seemed to be almost shielding the smaller and the more colorful vessels. The smaller ships were headed towards the Relay as it began to glow a brighter blue as it came online.

On the Weapon's Officers terminal, a light blipped green, letting him known they were in weapons range, "Open fire!" barked Desolas.

Within seconds, dozens of rounds had left each ships' cannon in his fleet, along with dozens of Disruptor missiles. All aimed at the Alien Dreadnought. Bright red and orange streaks shot out from the alien vessel as its turret emplacements tried to shoot down the incoming ordinance. Some were intercepted but most found their way through to the alien ship. Everyone was shocked when the rounds and missiles impacted the hull but rather than gutting the ship as was expected, holes were punctured and small rifts opened in the plating but otherwise it was still largely intact. "Spirit's, how?" Everyone was shocked, by all rights they should have been destroyed by the sheer amount of ordinance but instead it was still intact! Still, it did nothing to deter the aliens apparently. The alien dreadnought began to turn, its bow now aiming towards a group of cruisers. Within moments, from the single dreadnought, hundreds of missiles flew from the vessels. A moment later, the broadside of the dreadnought started to flare orange as its massive turrets began to fire on the fleet.

"Activate GARDIAN Defense Grid!" Every single ship activated their GARDIAN laser batteries to take out the missiles, but the sheer number and their velocity was more than enough to ensure more than half their number made it through. The missiles impacted the cruisers and the two dreadnoughts. Hulls shook and kinetic barriers shattered from the impact. But the worst damage was a slight charring of the plating from the explosions. Around him, bridge crew began yelling out status reports from other ships in the fleet.

"Frigate squad: Hexlion reports kinetic barriers dropping to 50%! That damn thing is firing slugs at them!"

"The Gordam Cruiser is displacing towards the rear of the fleet! Kinetic barriers are down and those damn cannons are tearing into the

hull!"

"Ferergal and Terul are reporting the same! Hull breaches in all lower decks!"

"Frigate Derom is dead in water! I repeat dead in the water!"

"All craft, triad formation! I want-" Before the Turian Fleet commander could finish his order, the bow of the alien dreadnought flashed a bright orange.

Before anyone knew what was happening, one of the officers manning the Tactical screamed cried out as two dots simply blipped out of existence, "Sir, the Orphus and Faeter are down! Their barriers couldn't hold against that vessels main gun!"

Desolas was shocked, almost too shocked for words. Yes a few of cruisers had lost their barriers but that pair had been towards the center of the fleet and had full charged kinetic barriers. He would have stood there, jaw open but Torsk's voice brought him out of his stupor. "It cleaved down 2 ships in one shot!?" The rage in his voice apparent. "Bring it down now! Get that nuke in the tube!" Despite how nuclear weapons were banned by the Council, Torsk had always been more of an independent mercenary than an actual general. He had enough illegal arms to start a planetary war.

The Mass Relay shined brightly as it the aliens had apparently finally managed to link with it. Right after Torsk had given the order, the alien dreadnought had turned and began heading for the Relay. The other ships began moving also, but still continued to be shielded to the alien dreadnought.

"Don't let it escape!" shouted Desolas, despite his order, he actually wanted them to escape. That way, he could use it as justification to follow them to one of their worlds, maybe even their homeworld.

All of the ships under his command were firing as fast as they could, attempting to down the ship before it could leave. Rounds were hitting it but to no avail. Right after the last of the other ships made it through; the dreadnought itself approached the relay and in a flash of light and eezo, departed.

"Dammit!" Desolas slammed a fist into a wall. "Make a sweep for survivors and regroup by the Relay. We have to stop that vessel before it can warn its people. We have 5 minutes then we are heading through!" ordered Desolas. Activating his private communications, he asked. "Torsk, we're going to need more ships. Think it's time call in a few favors?" Despite the size of their taskforce, if that dreadnought was any sign, the pair would need to call in some help. Mostly those of the less acceptable variety.

You could practically feel the feral grin coming from the Krogan. "Desolas, seems that these newcomers have some powerful weaponry. Weaponry that the Krogan Empire is interested in." Torsk stated. "By Kalros, yes, its time to pull in those favors."

"Yes, I saw. But they lack a basic shield system. I think it's best if we destroy the vessel and learn what we can. Before they call reinforcements before we can pacify them." Desolas said, knowing they

were no longer being recorded.

"Very well, when you're ready, we'll head out." stated Torsk. "Just don't take too long my friend. It has been a long time since we Krogan have met such an enemy, and my trigger finger is itchy."

"We have a few minutes before we pursue, at which point, we will find their home planet, subjugate their species and make them into a client-species in the name of both the Krogan and Turians." stated Desolas. "Just be sure to send out the coordinates to our 'mutual friends'. I'd rather get this done quick and over with."

Torsk began laughing "I like the way you think Desolas," The sound of fists slamming together could be heard over the comm. "Let's get to it"

2. First Contact: Hold the Line: Edited

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk. II

Chapter 2

Fire for Effect: Hold the Line

"The sounds of Conflict, will shatter the strength of any Peace."

-Unknown

Version 2.11

On the far edge of the newly titled Shanxi system, named after the sole Human-Majority Colony in the system, a massive technological relic had been discovered some time ago. The colony itself had been only establish a few years ago and as most of the resources and value was closer to the star, few felt the need to explore the outer reaches of the system. Until recently that is.

As per standard protocol, any investigations of the relic were treated with the utmost caution, not wanting to accidentally trigger something, no matter what it may be. Despite having similar aesthetics to Forerunner designs, it was most definitely not Forerunner. It had no reaction whatsoever to those confirmed to be of Reclaimer status. The device would have gone ignored for quite possibly years more, if not decades, were it not for the fact that it seemingly activated on its own, and showed up on every sensor scan within the system.

Only recently, after the activation of the artifact, had the UNSC/UEG authorized a more detailed and intrusive inspection of the vessels. Dozens of civilian craft were now approaching the vessel, many of them outfitted with the finest scientific instruments inside and out. Watching over them was the Colonial Defense Force Marathon-Class cruiser; the Right of Way. Currently, the sole military vessel in the entire system, and nearby reinforcements being day away at the least. With the colony so far removed from New Covenant borders, along with any known areas of pirate activity, a stronger defense fleet was seen as excessive.

In the command chair of the Marathon-Class Cruiser sat Captain Tekau Zarais. A relatively new officer, one of the first to come out of the Officer Candidate Schools on Luna after the Human-Covenant War, The Heretic War and the Second Insurrection. "Kalia, watch our approach. Any news from the science teams?"

Next to the armrest/command pillion, the image of a young woman, wearing the highest fashion from 1990s New York that would, and did make heads turn, appeared. "Oh nothing much. Seems there's quite a large energy field emanating from the device. The boys are asking if they can a peek up her skirt." Kalia answered. One of the latest in the generation of Smart-AIs, which were becoming more and more commonplace thanks to the method pioneered by the Doctors Halsey and Denton, the creation of Smart-AIs by the cloning of Human brains and flash coping of memories. Still, they were far less common then their 'dumb' brethren. "So what should I tell them?"

"Let them go, but bring us in closer with them. First sign of trouble we're pulling the eggheads back and quarantining the damn thing." He answered. Looking at the floating relic projected on the screens in front of him, he repressed a shudder. This, 'thing' had an aura around it. Being around it just felt wrong, not only that, the feeling was primal; telling him to just ignore it and go around. "Just tell them to be quick about it. I'm only giving them a few hours today, before we head back. Tell them if they complain, they can just come back again later."

"Message sent and delivered. And not even a peep of protest." Winking at the Captain she added, "I think they like me."

Zarais snorted. "More like they got a nosebleed from the innuendos you probably put in the message. Despite me telling you to stop that." With later generations of Smart-AIs, some of them developed, for lack of a better word, eccentricities. Nothing dangerous that could lead to early rampancy, but little things. Some were actually religious, others more cynical, some optimistic while a few like Kalia developed, a more perverted personality.

"Yes well, you can't deny-" She stopped, her avatar turning her 'head' to look towards the artifact, "What in the world?"

"Kalia, what's going on?"

"The energy from the relic, its reaching out, towardsâ€|the ships! Towards us!" She yelled. "The civilian craft are reporting energy surges! Something's going on with their navigational drives! Slipspace drives are being suffering some sort of fluctuations! The energy is arcing towards us!"

Cursing under his breath, the Captain began barking out orders. "Tell the civvies to pull back! Get away from the artifact as fast as possible! Have those small enough to enter our hangars! Helmsman! Full reverse now! I want a fucking planet between us and that relic yesterday!"

The helmsman replied, "Yes sir! Full reverse no-Sir! I've lost control of the engines! Slipspace drive is nonresponsive!"

"I'm getting coordinate data! The system is accepting the feed! I can't read it!" This time it came from navigation.

Kalia spoke, "I'm getting a data burst from the relic. Opening now." A millisecond passed as she opened the compressed data and read its contents. The eyes on her avatar widened as she broadcasted to all ships near the relay, "ALL HANDS! BRACE FOR SUDDEN ACCELERATION!" Not a moment after she spoke those words did all the vessels around the Relic were suddenly catapulted into the unknown. In that instant, the inertial dampeners were pushed to their limits as they compensated for the sudden burst as dark energy from the Relay wrapped around the Marathon and the civilian vessels, giving each ship an aura of blue energy, though the Marathon's was shakier than the others, before each ship was catapulted forward at incredible speeds.

In a different system, within relatively close distance to an exact copy of the artifact in the Shanxi system, the civilian craft and the Right of Way decelerated back to normal space.

On the bridge of the Cruiser, the crew were thrown forward though all of them managed to remain at their stations. "Report!"

"Slipspace drive in unresponsive! It'sâ€¦it's shut downâ€¦!" The helmsman answered. A quiet murmur rounded throughout the bridge crew. As far as anyone knew, slipspace drive engines, once activated were never meant to be taken apart, and the only way to shut one down was to shut off a ship's reactor, and even then the things possessed an internal power source. The things were notoriously difficult to do any sort of work with. Any efforts to shut them down totally were met with either the engineers disappearing or catastrophe. As a result, many slipspace drive engines of decommissioned vessels were shunted into the sun, or put into a hibernation state with high-security lockdown protocols in place.

Across the bridge, others began to report in the statuses on their consoles. For the most part, everything was still operational, though there were reports of hull stresses in various sections of the ship. Nothing too concerning, but Zarais had those sections evacuated and sealed off just in case.

"Navigation is still online, showing a surge in coordinate data. Shunting data to empty server and isolating."

"The civilians?"

"Panicked, worried. Wondering what the hell just happened but otherwise fine captain."

"Send out some of our Longswords and Claymores, get them flying closer to the civilian ships. Try to reassure them everything's alright. Now can someone tell me what the hell just happened?"

"That 'relic' is apparently some sort of faster-than-light travel catapult." Kalia answered. "Just before we launched I got a data packet from the device. Apparently it's called a Mass Relay. The information wasn't even in an alien language but it used a pi-baseline for its code. Took me less than a nanosecond to translate it, as those someone made it that way. I got information on how they operate, and more importantly; how to get us home."

"Alright. Send whatever you need to send to the civvies. Use the data to get us back home. Do what you have to."

"Understood sir." With that Kalia's avatar went faded. A short while passed as fighters passed over the civilian ships. Getting ready to travel back through this relay device. 'Least it's all quiet here.' The captain thought to himself. 'That much fortune has given us.

Fate, it seems, was eager to correct that. "Contact! Twenty-six ships! Unknown classification! Two are Cruiser analogues,, another eight frigates analogues and the rest read as corvettes!"

"Shit! You know protocol people! First Contact: Assume Hostilities! Ready Archer Pods, get the AAA Helix Grid up, prep the MACs!" Around him those in charge of the weapons stations, both the primary, secondary and tertiary weapons, their hands were a blur as they passed over their consoles. "Someone tell the civilians to get behind the Way. Our priority are the civilians and getting out of people don't forget that." Since the Human-Covenant War, the primary task of any military commander, when in the presence of civilians was said civilians and their evacuation. "Kalia, have they tried contacting us at all?"

"Negative sir, they're ignoring all hails I-Energy spikes detected! Focus on their bows and 'wings'! They're firing!" On the screen they could see the streaks of light as missiles and projectiles flashed across space towards the Way. Normally, the Right of Way would have been tried to avoid the majority of the shots, letting the others strike against the thick armored hull. A luxury that the smaller civilian ships, leaving the Way with only one course of action.

"All hands brace for impact!" The deck shook from the alien ordinance as it struck the hull. Alarms started blaring on the bridge. "Report!: Zarais yelled out.

"We've got multiple hull-breaches: starboard side! Decompressions in sections on decks: 5, 7, 8, and 10! We've lost one Autocannon emplacement. Several casualties!"

"Some get me a firing solution on those bastards! Archer pods A1 through F3, I want a wide swath across that entire damn battle group! Fire the moment you have the solutions set! All starboard cannons: fire!"

Across the starboard broadside of the refit Marathon-Class cruiser, the covers of the oversized half of the cruiser's oversized Archer Missile Pods, each carrying 60 M58 Archer Missiles each, explosively expelled themselves, revealing their payloads within. Not a moment later, hundreds of missiles roared out, streaking across the void to their targets. Some were struck down but the vast majority made it through, impacting on the shields of the alien ships. Leaving scorch marks in many, deep rents in some, and crippling a few. Even as the missiles were leaving their pods, the half dozen, newly added 105mm Autocannon emplacements opened fire. At over a 1000 rounds a minute, metallic death soon began pounding on the alien warships.

"Some give me a status on the relic. And did our weapons do anything?"

"Sir, enemy ships possess shielding technology! But very weak! Detecting multiple hull breaches from several enemy ships!"

"Sir, both MACs are fully charged! Targeting solutions set for their frigates!"

"Reorient us to target their ships! Turn the ship onto its side, have the civies stay behind us." The Right of Way began to turn, presenting its bow to the alien ships, at the same time, turning so that it's 'side' was now the 'bottom' the civilian vessels diving below to stay out of the line of fire. The moment the alien ships were directly 'in front' of his ships, he yelled: "Open fire!" On his command, the deck shuddered as the two six hundred ton ferric Tungsten rounds streaked forth from the muzzle of the MACs, little more than a golden blur as they hurtled towards their targets.

The first round struck one of the alien frigates, the hyper-velocity round tunneled through the shields as though they weren't there. The kinetic energy rippled through the superstructure of the ship as the round traveled clean through and through. For a moment, the ship had great hole coming out its 'top' before shattered into thousands of pieces as the kinetic energy overwhelmed it. The round tunneled sliced off one of the 'wings', sending the vessel hurtling through space through momentum, the kinetic energy again shattering a large part of the vessel. The shot itself continued on through the void, disappearing from sight.

The second shot missed by a hair's breadth; an inherent flaw when fire the Marathon's twin MACs in unison.

Still the captain smiled. If this was the worst these new aliens could through at them, then the UNSC, hell the CDF was more than well prepared.

Kalia's avatar reappeared, "All calculations made and relayed to the civilians. Commands sent to the artifact and ready for use."

"Send the civilians through now! Rotate the ship one hundred eighty degrees: present our unmarred broadside to the contacts! The moment the last of the civvies are through, we follow!"

"Sir they're firing again!"

"I don't care! The civilians are our priority! Keep them covered."

"Reporting hull breaches on more decks! Lost one, now three gun emplacements! Captain-" Another officer tried to protest, only to be shut down.

"You heard my orders!"

Kalia's interrupted the Captain, "The last of the civilians are through! Commands have been sent: all hands brace for acceleration!"

Again the crew were thrown forward but this time had better braced themselves for it. By the time they had returned to Shanxi space, the civilian craft were already making way towards the planet. And by the comm. chatter, we're screaming on all frequencies just what had happened.

"Comms! Get me a line to Second Line! I need General Williams on the line."

"Sir, he's hailing us!"

On the holoemitter the image of an aged man, his hair gray with age but still displaying a proud aura of power appeared, "Right of Way, Right of Way. What the hell is going on out there? I've got civilian ships panicking about a 'another Covenant' and 'invading armies'. Just what the hell did you people find?"

"Sir, I can't tell you how relieved I am to hear your voice. We have encountered a new hostile alien race, potentially more. I repeat they are hostile. Their guns don't got much punch but they got the numbers sir. I'm leaking atmosphere, got multiple hull breaches and damn sure that these guys are not far behind."

The General's face didn't pale, nor show any sign of fear. If anything he took on a hardened look. The look of a veteran who had seen too many wars and was ready to jump back in the saddle. General Bertoldo Williams was an old man, old enough to have participated in the later years of the Human-Covenant War. He had his first taste of combat as a Second Lieutenant during the Battle of Reach. And later, made his name during the Battle of Earth. He had the reputation of being able to pull through almost any battle. If not win, at the very least survive. It was still a mystery why a man with his reputation had taken over the local system's primary CDF garrison base. He turned, barking out orders the Captain couldn't hear then the General turned back to the screen.

"Get your ass within the grid Captain. We'll give these bastards a 'Welcome To Shanxi' Gift basket." Williams's had a near feral grin, referring to the orbital defense grid. "I'm ordering the civilians into the bunkers, but's it going to take time. We're sending a message calling for help, but don't expect anything for a while. Mind dropping whatever you extra ordinance you got on that boat of yours my way? I think we're going to need it."

Both the Captain and the General could read the message hidden between the lines. If the worst came to pass, than Shanxi would need every advantage, every defender and every bullet it could get its hands on. "Understood sir." Off screen he made a gesture, signaling others to begin ground drop operations. With that the general's image went away. In the Hangar bay, D79H-TC Pelican were being loaded up with munitions, troopers and a myriad of other supplies. M12 FAV "Warthogs" in multiple variants were being loaded up and prepped for an orbit to atmosphere transfer. M809B Scorpion Main Battle Tanks were being secured, others had weapons pods secured to the underside. Others were being outfitted for gunship roles. The moment they were ready, the dropships took off and began heading towards the planet. Longswords, Broadwords and Claymores were taking off from inside the ship and heading towards the planet.

In geosynchronous orbit above the planet were three Mark III Orbital Defense Platforms: Base Variants. Each carrying the single most powerful projectile weapon known to Humankind: the Mark V 'Super' MAC, or "The Big Stick". It was capable of sending a three thousand tungsten/depleted Uranium round at four percent of the speed of light. As the alien ships began to come out of FTL and return to normal space, the three platforms began to orient themselves: the

muzzles of their cannons aimed toward the unknowns. Their barrels flared in silence as they fired their shots. This though, the aliens were prepared. All of the three shots were kill shots, but this time each round only claimed one vessel, a frigate-tonnage, removing the vessel from this plain of existence before continuing into the void. It didn't matter however, the sheer distance between the two groups and the firepower of the Orbital platforms meant that they would strike them all down before they even got close.

Then, it all went wrong. One by one the alien ships were wrapped in a blue aura, not like that of the event horizon of a slipspace portal. Suddenly, they jumped forward. One moment they were by the relic, the next they were directly next to the stations. They were out of the minimum cone of fire for the platforms' main cannon. The point defense autocannons opened fire on the alien warships, but too little too late. The alien guns began to pepper the stations. For all their firepower, for all their armor, the stations were not designed to handle such a barrage as that close range. One by one the stations began to fracture. The once massive monuments to Human ingenuity and firepower turned into so much scrap. Hundreds on the stations died and those who made it to ships and escape pods were soon shot down by the alien ships.

Back on the Way, the Captain had a white knuckle grip on his command chair. "Kalia, engage Cole Protocol. Begin mass evacuation of the ship. All personnel are to report to escape pods and any remaining space worthy vessels and head planetside." Looking towards the AI he added, "That includes you too love." Zarais and Kalia had been a long time working pair: almost 10 years. Despite the captain's young age, he had been working with Kalia since her initial start-up. They had a closeness that bordered romantic, but both knew it could never go beyond close friends. The bridge had already started moving the moment he gave his orders. They knew if they disobeyed, he would just knock them out and dump them in a pod.

After the crew had cleared out, her avatar appeared yet again, this time though, she was dressed more casual. A favor to the captain who enjoyed that over her usually fancy styles. Smiling, she 'looked' towards Zarais. "Together to the end Te." She knew what he was planning, they both did. They couldn't run. The slipspace drive was inoperable. Meaning they couldn't jump to slipspace and retreat. Nor would they have ever considered it. There was no point trying to contact for help. Shanxi already sent out the call, and their long range communications were rendered moot. That left one choice: to go down fighting and by those planetside as much time as they could. "The last of the pods and dropships are away. We're alone."

"Good. Charge up the MACs. Arm whatever Archer Pods we got left. Ready the autocannons."

"MACs are no go. Whatever happened when we made that second trip, the magnetic coils aren't working for some reason."

"Guess that leaves one option then. Ready self-destruct."

There weren't anymore words to say. The bridge stayed silent as the thousand meter vessel charged forward into the heart of the enemy fleet. Archer missiles flared their engines as they left their pods and began impacting the remaining the ships. As the Way came closer, the cruisers began to distance themselves. The Right of Way's

autocannons opened fire with a fury unexpected. The guns burning through their ammunition stores until their barrels glowed red hot and still they fired. When the last Archer pod was expended, the last gun turret destroyed. The alien warships had lost five of their corvettes. Their other ships were dead in the water or suffered slight damage but most were still operational. Their helmsman and gunnery crews having successfully dodged and avoided the worst of the damage. The Way was a shadow of its former self. The hull was pocket marked with so many holes, the plating starting to peel off from the force. Atmosphere was visibly leaking from the ship. Two of the corvettes-tonnage vessels closed in. Intent on claim their prize.

On the bridge, Human and AI shared one last look. And then, for a moment, the Right of Way shined bright as star. The two corvettes that had closed in were vaporized along with the cruiser. The battle above Shanxi was over. The aliens had won this round.

Now it was time for the ground war. And blood will be spilled.

Teaser Ad. for a friend.

Excerpt from Mass Effect: Salvation by EspionageDB7 on Deviantart.

Gordon turned to face the Commander, locking eyes with his. "Commander." He began, with a look of resolve on his face. "It would be my honor, to serve under you." Gordon affirmed, as he extended his hand.

A grin overtook Shepard's expression, as he shook his head. "No, Doctor Freeman." He replied, extending his own hand to shake Gordon's. "It would be MY honor, to serve beside you."

In the blackness of space, and the void of the abyss, two men aboard the SR-2 Normandy, stood face to face, making a pact. Heroes may be but ordinary men, who do extraordinary things, at extraordinary times. But there are heroes, and then there are legends...

What happens when history's greatest hero joins forces with the future's greatest champion?

After Gordon Freeman is allegedly killed by the ruthless Combine Regime, Earth enters into a

new golden age of technological advancement. Until 179 years later, when galactic civilization is

threatened once more. After nearly two centuries, Dr. Gordon Freeman finds himself in the midst

of a strange, new reality. With a past in ruins, and a future in jeopardy, he must join forces

with the inexorable Commander John Shepard, and the entire crew of the SR-2 Normandy,

in order to try and stop the most relentless enemy the galaxy has ever known. An enemy bent on

bringing about the annihilation of life itself...

3. Shanxi: Arrival of the Fleet: Edited

Alternate Past, Uncertain Future MKII

Unggoy: Grunts

Sangheili: Elites

Kig-Yar: Jackals

Chapter 3

Shanxi: Arrival of the Fleet/End of Conflict

V2.1

"_Did I know what I was heading into that day? That I would be blazing my way into the history books with a single battle? No, I didn't. If I did, I probably would have requested some other poor soul to take my place. Lord know it would have saved me the headaches."_

-Excerpt from the journals of Jesse De La Rosa.

In the skies above Shanxi, Desolas Arterius watched with the skies above the colony from his ship with an almost tired expression as both his and Torsk's force subjugated the alien residents on the planet below. It had been sometime since the moment of First Contact with this species, and already they had laid claim to much of the planet. Capturing and holding the majority of the aliens in some of the larger settlements, and resistance had been relatively light and inconsequential. Mostly.

There had been a single settlement built right into a mountain that was putting up a not inconsiderable amount of resistance. Whoever had designed the city, and indeed it was a city, had been either paranoid or a tactical genius as it was also surrounded by a canyon, with the only means of entering the city either through the air or by a number of bridges spanning the gap. The only reason they hadn't tried to take it out from orbit was that the mountain provided a degree of protection, and it possessed enough anti-orbital weapons to keep itself protected. Still, it was not of much importance as they had taken the larger settlements, along with the planet's orbital elevator. Desolas grimaced, the loss of the alien's orbital elevator was a loss, as it would have made movements to and from the planet's surface that much easier. "Damn it Torsk, would it kill you to exercise a little more restraint?" He muttered. "We're to exploit these aliens, not exterminate them."

Still, least the favors they had called in had borne fruit. Several dozen vessels from private military companies from Citadel space, along with a several more factions in the Terminus systems had come to bolster their numbers and subjugate the planet. In exchange for a cut of the later profits of course, for some that is. Others would be getting nothing from this venture except repaying an old favor that either Torsk or Desolas had been holding over people's head for quite a while.

Suddenly, one of the bridge officers, the one in charge of the scanner station called out, "Unknown energy readings! Massive! Coming in front!" At the same time, in the void of space, a disk of energy boomed silently into existence. Its core blue as the deepest sea, the color fading to white as it came close to the event horizon. Then another disk boomed into existence close by. And another, then another. Within seconds, dozens of the disks have flashed into existence. And not moments after they had appeared, something began to come through them. A metal rod, attached to a great hulking mass of metal: ships. An entire battle group of ships began to come through the portals. Each one closing behind the ship after it had passed through. The majority of the alien warships, upon noticing the new arrivals, began to reorient themselves and accelerate towards them.

Upon seeing the ships, Desolas snarled, before ordering as all ships to get into combat formation and to follow his commands, while at the same time, having a message relayed to Torsk's flagship. Knowing him, the krogan was too busy enjoying whatever spoils had already been brought up from the planet. As the ships began to get into formation, following orders he had sent out beforehand just in case, Desolas prepared for what very well maybe the fight of his life.

****APUFMKII****

On the bridge of the UNSC Infinity-Class Dreadnought, at its head stood Rear Admiral Lower Half Jesse De-La Rosa. A man often heralded as one of the best that Humanity had to offer. Called the "Paragon of Humanity", he had earned that reputation for his service during the Heretic Wars and the Second Insurrection; by being the best humanity had to offer.

His fleet consisted of a mix of ships. A total of fifteen frigates, which were a mix of the Montreal-Class Heavy Frigates and Rider-Class Light-Frigates, along with ten Midway-Class Destroyers, and three Vadrigos-Class Carriers. Along with his flagship, the UNSC Infinity, now renamed, UNSC Era of Retaliation. He noticed the disappearance of the colony's space elevator.

Seeing the alien ships that were appearing on the tactical display, the Admiral started to think back to when he had been informed about these new aliens and his new mission back on Reach a few days ago.

****APUFMKII****

Reach: UNSC/New Covenant HighCom: The Nest

The hydraulic doors leading to the most secure room on Reach known the military hissed open and Fleet Admiral stepped through, the same doors closing behind him right after.

He snapped off sharp salute. In front of him sat some of, if not the, most powerful people in the Alliance Military. "Sirs! Reporting as ordered."

The room was currently filled by perhaps the most powerful beings in the known galaxy, or at least, those who held the most power. One

side sat Fleet Admiral Terrence "Lord" Hood. De facto leader of the entire UNSC and the UEG. Admiral Hieronymus Michael Stanforth, highly decorated veteran, and commander of planetary defenses across UNSC territories. Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky, Director of ONI, and her protegee; Captain Serin Osman. The latter of whom was widely regarded as the second most dangerous woman in the UNSC after her mentor, Parangosky.

On the other, was UNSC Army General Howard Graves, once leader of the First Insurrection, now returned to the UNSC. His return generated many a rumor as to the circumstances how it happened. Army Colonel James Ackerson, who was a permanent liaison to ONI from the UNSC Army. Arbiter of the People of Sanghelios: Thel'Vadam, with his right hand, Special Operations Commander of the New Covenant Rtas'Vadum.

A meeting like this was unprecedented. There was rarely ever a meeting like this as few circumstances required so many to be in attendance.

'This does not bode well.' De La Rosa thought.

Lord Hood raised his hand. "At ease." With that, the Rear Admiral relaxed his stance ever so partially but was still ramrod straight. "Have a seat." De la Rosa sat in the proffered chair. Soon the room was plunged into darkness and from the center of the table a holoprojector activated, displaying what De La Rosa recognized as the newly named Shanxi System. Hood began to explain, "Some time ago, we received a direct beam transmission from the colony of Shanxi. And as many of you know, an artifact of unknown nature was only recently found on the outer edges of the Shanxi system." The holo changed to show said relic: a massive object shaped like a sideways tuning fork with antennas. "Only recently have science teams been granted to approach the object, escorted by the CDF Marathon-Class Cruiser, Right of Way. The artifact is apparently some sort of means of FTL. It snared both the cruiser and the science vessels before accelerating them to an unknown location and an identical object." Hood motioned to Parangosky to take over.

The ONI Director motioned to Osman, "Upon arrival, the Right of Way made First Contact with another alien race, possibly two." The hologram changed to show several ships of two distinct design ideologies. The De la Rosa's eyes widened, as did many others. If Osman noticed, she didn't show it. "It is unknown just what exactly transpired without the black box flight recorder, but we know that the after the civilian ships returned, they were followed by the unknowns. The Orbital Defense Platforms engaged them, however, there were...complications."

The holo of the planet reappeared and holographic representations of three orbital defense platforms appeared. Soon after the red triangles reappeared and started firing on the platforms until they came apart. "All three Orbital Defense Platforms were lost, assumed all hands. The Right of Way was taken down soon after." Osman explained. "As of last transmission, the enemy has made planetfall and have taken up positions in orbit of the planet. Local militia and Colonial Defense Garrisons were reported as being deployed, and have also received plenty of reinforcements and munitions from the Way before it fell."

Ackerson stood up, Osman already handing over the reins as it were.

"From the data they sent before transmissions were cut off, we've managed to glean some of the capabilities of these unknowns' apparent warships." The hologram changed to give a more detailed and enlarged view of the two design ideas. One was angular in design and flat, not unlike an elongated Longsword fighter, the other, was not unlike a flying box. A heavily armed, lethal, box.

"As you can obviously see, it is more than likely we are dealing with at least two new species. The first group of vessels, those that are streamlined, have been designated as Type-1s, with their own subcategories. And the same with the other, which we've labelled as type-2s." The holographic ships reflected their new designations. "From what little battldata we've received, based on the information sent by the Right of Way, the weapons of these aliens are some cause for concern, but in the long run are inconsequential."

The holoprojector again changed, showing what was obviously a camera-view from one of the Orbital Defense Platforms, and from the looks of it, the one for the main cannon, alongside a map-overlay of the system. "However, there is something else that is cause for concern." On the gun-cam, the alien ships were barely a spec, while the overlay showed the ships at the max range of the platforms, still a considerable distance, considering Super-MACs could send a three ton projectile at speeds of twelve kilometers a second. The platforms soon fired, the slugs streaking across like slivers of light towards their targets. Some hit, the others missed. Then, something happened; the ships were wrapped in a blue aura, completely encompassing them. A split second later, they were within point defense range of the ODPs. Outside the view of the gun-cam, the feed quickly switched to that of an point-defense emplacement. As the autocannons began to fire, the alien ships returned in kind. Streaks of blue striking the station and making it shudder with shot after shot. Eventually the station was just torn apart by the rapid fire and the feed died out soon after. "These aliens are capable of jumping into FTL in real space, and it seems they are capable of using it with pinpoint accuracy." This got murmurs amongst those present. FTL as they knew it, specifically slipspace, was incredibly difficult to use accurately, even with modern calculations.

Slipstream Space, or slipspace as it was called, was actually another 'plane of existence' as it were. The intricacies were beyond most people, however, in slipspace, the laws of physics only worked to a certain extent, and even then, not always. The slipspace portals were literally tears in reality as ships entered and exited the higher plane. However, when exiting, it was only partially predictable. Arrival locations could be anywhere from hundreds of thousands, to over a million kilometers away from the predicted exit point, and there was also the time-dilation effect, ships entering slipspace and exiting anywhere from weeks to in rare cases, months after. There were even rumors of ships having traveled back in time but those were unsubstantiated. The newer calculations ensured ships entering formation would exit the same and for the most part, where they expected to. However, extreme short range jumps as these aliens did was all but impossible.

Ackerson sat down, his job done. Hood taking over again, he said, "We've since sent a Prowler to recon the system. They report that reinforcements have been rolling in, and the planetary situation does not look good. Rear Admiral De La Rosa," Here, said Admiral sat straighter, "We're sending you to retake the system. As of right now,

only UNSC forces will be at your disposal. Any and all tactics and weapons are available to you, barring nuclear weapons. Do you have any questions?"

De La Rosa nodded, "Just one sir, what is my flagship?" Hood simply smirked in response.

****APUFMKII****

Back in the present, De la Rosa focused on the task at hand, listening to the various status reports of his bridge officers. So far everything seemed to be good, though there were some anomalies in the slipspace drives but well within acceptable parameters. The fleet had checked in and so far no mishaps and in perfect formation.

One of the sensor operators reported, "Sir, we've got multiple contacts, IFFs confirmed as hostile. Moving to intercept."

"Classifications?"

"Based on size and projected weights, the majority, approximately seventy-five percent, are reading as UNSC corvette-tonnage vessels, along with three cruiser-tonnage vessels. The remainder read as frigate-tonnage vessels, sir. Multiple Type-1s and Type-2s sir, along with numerous unknown classifications."

The Rear Admiral considered his options for a moment. He knew that based on the sheer number of contacts, his ships may be in for a fight, but his flagship gave him considerable leeway as to how he utilized his ships. And those planetside could use all the aid they could get. His decision made, he began to distribute his forces. "Send down the Heaven's Wings to the planet's surface. Have them provide support to the local forces and aid. Have frigates Dawn of Light and the Forward Unto Dawn escort her down to the surface. Let's get those people some help." On the tactical map, the symbols of the designated ships altered to reflect their new purpose. "Have them start deploying ODSTs, along with their onboard Army and Marine contingents." The Heaven's Wings was one among the three Carriers in the battle group. It carried not only their standard compliment of fighters but a battalion of the 105th Marine Expeditionary Unit, aka, Orbital Drop Shock Troopers Division, better known as 'The Helljumpers.'

"Solera," to the Rear Admiral's right, a hologram of a woman dressed in the garb of an Amazonian Warrior appeared. "Hail the aliens if you can. Use whatever you can to access their linguistic programs. I want to give them the chance to surrender before anything else." Solera answered in the affirmative before her avatar faded away. "In the meantime, have the rest of the fleet get into formation. I want the majority of our frigates and destroyers form into wolf-packs, and have the two carriers flank the Era. We'll be providing escort for them." The battle-group began to move to their assigned groups. "I want targeting solutions prepped and ready for all ships. Ready the MAC guns, and arm Archer and Howler Pods, A1 to A6."

Solera's avatar reappeared. "Sir, they are ignoring hails. Should I--"

Alarms blared momentarily as one of the sensor stations yelled out.

"Sir! Energy spikes among the enemy ships! It's focused on the bows of their ships."

"We've got enemy ordinance inbound. Missiles with unknown energy signature. Impact in sixty seconds."

"Enemy vessels are beginning to enter into some sort of formation."

De La Rosa sighed, he had hoped that diplomacy was an option. That the bloodshed could be ended here and now before it could go any further. Apparently it was not. Steeling himself, he asked, "Weapons station, confirm; are we receiving signals from the mines?"

"Confirmed sir, receiving signals from ten Hornet-Class nuclear Mines. They are armed and ready to detonate on your command."

Before De la Rosa could do anything, Solera held up a palm. Grabbing the entire bridge crew's attention. "Hold on, I'm getting a data stream from the planet."

"Is it Second Eden?" Second Eden was the location of the command headquarters of the local CDF contingent.

"No, it's a superintendent-class AI. Getting a status report and video feed. Decompressing and analyzing no-oh my god." The moment the bridge crew heard the AI, everything stopped. With the latest advancements in Artificial Intelligence creation, especially 'smart' AIs, they could process the whole of known recorded history, Human, New Covenant and Forerunner, in the span of a few hours of first activation. And they did it with the barest of shudders. The genocides committed when Humanity was still trapped to Earth. The atrocities committed during the Human-Covenant War. And the wars recorded by the Forerunners. War crimes had been committed. They accepted it. What they processed did indeed disturb them, but they did not let it affect them. For an AI to be shocked by what they had seen, meant that whatever she had seen was near unprecedented.

When the bridge crew turned to face Solera's avatar, she had crumpled to the 'floor' of her projector. Propping herself 'up' with her arms. "Solera." The Rear Admiral whispered in a voice so low, she almost missed it. She turned her 'head' to face the rear admiral, though she was an AI, there was a display look of real anguish. "Show me." She shook her head no. "Solera," the Jesse repeated. "Show me."

This time she did nod. Standing back up, her face had changed from sadness to rage, her voice was laced with so much venom and anger it sent a shudder down the backs of a few who heard her. "No mercy." She snarled before her avatar disappeared and a direct beam flashed from her podium into the admiral's eyes. Seconds later, it stopped and his face displayed no emotion.

When he spoke, his voice was completely devoid of emotion. "No mercy." He whispered. He stood from the command chair. "Coms, fleet wide broadcast."

"Aye Sir, fleetwide broadcast. Confirmed, everyone hears you sir."

"All ships, this is Rear Admiral Jesse De La Rosa. You all know who I am, you know of my reputation. Of how I am a man who prefers peace over bloodshed, surrender over death. And I know many of you think me weak for it. Well today, that is no longer the case." Across the fleet, men and woman stopped in their actions to listen to their commander. From the lowly Marine private shining his boots and cleaning his rifle, to a mighty Colonel to the UNSC ODSI division and the Captains of the other vessels.

"Many of you remember the dark days of the Great War and the Heretic War. The atrocities our enemies committed against our fellow man, the systematic attempted genocide of our race." Some of the older veterans who remembered the last days of that war gritted their teeth or flexed old wounds at the memories. "Along with the vows we made to ensure such events never occur again, and the hope with the end of the war, that those memories can lie buried in the past." Old memories were remembered, old wounds reopened. "It seems that is no longer the case. Once again we have made first contact, and once again have they fired the first shot. But this time it will be different. We are no longer hiding amongst the shadows in the void," Many remembered how during the Heretic Wars, the ships of humanity were almost always dwarfed by those of the Covenant. "But we now stand tall amongst the stars!" Many of the younger generation cheered, recalling the first time they had seen the UNSC Infinity and the new warships, now almost equal to the New Covenant.

"These aliens believe that we are weak! That we can be beaten, thrown down and humiliated! And we, shall prove just how wrong they are!" If any amongst the various crews, marines, or soldiers felt any sort of hesitation or trepidation of the coming battle, it was all but gone now. Replaced by a desire to both show humanity's strength, and just how badly pissed off it was.

****APUFMKII****

Shortly after the Rear Admiral's speech, the carrier UNSC Heaven's Wings, entered low orbit of Shanxi, directly overhead of Second Eden. From the ship, signs of heavy battle could be seen; wrecked structures, smoking and burning buildings, vehicles and the like, the occasional detonation of explosives and other signs. And that was just Second Eden.

Inside the lower section of the carrier, on its dropdeck, called by the ODSIs as 'Hell's Waiting Room', was separated into several sections, and each hosting several squads. Here the ODSIs were making final preparations for their drop. In each section, a platoon of ODSIs in armor, some helmeted, some not, stood around a pair of holodisplays; both projecting a 3D image of Second Eden with a tactical holographic Second Eden was surrounded by a mass of red dots, representing enemy IFF tags, a number of which were inside the city itself. Opposite were blue dots, representing Second Eden's police force, militia and CDF garrison.

"Shit, this is Shanxi?" Private Maks asked, a relatively young and 'green' ODSI, he had only a few combat drops under his belt, mostly against Heretic remnants. He was often called 'the Rook', being the youngest on the squad. "Where are the ODPs?" The Rook still had his helmet on, but it was un-polarized, showing his young and unscarred face. Strapped to his back was a Type-51 Directed Energy Rifle/Improved or "Plasma Repeater". With the end of the Great War

and those that followed, old Covenant weapons began making their way into human hands on a more regular basis, resulting in some adopting covenant weapons as their personal weapons. "I mean, those things can take out a New Covenant Assault Carrier one shot, so these thingsâ€¦I mean, how the fuck could they take them out?" It was a question shared by many ODS'Ts, if not all of them. ODPs were seen as almost being invincible as, provided no significant boarding action happened, the only way to take one out was to sacrifice a number of other ships just so a handful could get in close enough to neutralize them.

"Well they did." Designated Marksmen Sergeant Lance Trel answered, drawing the Rook's, and several other ODS'Ts', attention. His helmet was sitting on the holodisplay, and was cradling a SRS99D-S5 Anti-Material Sniper Rifle in his hands, playing with the scope, and had an M395-B Designated Marksman Rifle on his back. "According to the reports, the stations took out one of the bastard ships but the others dodged them. Used some sort of weird shit to get right in the stations' faces, took them out at point blank range." Lance had the reputation of ALWAYS being the first to read the reports, and getting a bit more info then there was usually available

.

"Shit, just like that?" Rook asked. "But aren't these things supposed to be, I don't know, invincible?"

"No, they're not. Once the enemy ships got to close for the SMAC, it was over. Those things don't have much in the way of point defenses." Corporal Hadrian Maxim answered. He was older than the majority of the other ODS'Ts in his squad, well into his fifties, apporaching his sixties, but thanks to modern medicine, had the stature of a fit forty year old. "You all read the reports when we got them; the station was pummeled by these aliens' main cannons. Shoot anything enough times and it'll snap under the pressure." Strapped on his back was a M95 Close Assault Weapon, along with spare rocket canisters. He was the designated Heavy-weapons trooper of the squad, usually carrying the heavier arms for to break up large infantry groups or for anti-armor.

"But-"He stopped hearing the door to the launch bay open to allow a single heavy armored trooper into the bay. He like everyone else turned to see the new arrival. Their armor resembled the standard ODS'T battle suit, but had so many bolt-ons and modifications that it bore little resemblance to the original gear. What drew their attention were two things: the double silver bars on his left and right shoulder signifying his rank as a captain, and the Horus eye emblazoned on the right shoulder. "SpecOpsâ€¦" Someone muttered. SpecOps was not the official name of those with the symbol, rather one that was applied to them, based on the missions they showed up for. These missions being those that were reserved for the elites.

Last time this particular squad had gotten involved with a SpecOps agent, they ended up having to take down a Heretic Covenant cell. The ODS'Ts ended up with stopping the release of some sort of Forerunner bio-agent they found before the canister detonated. They had lost a lot of good men that day. The SpecOps agent had barely done anything on the job; only taking out the cell leader and confiscating the suspected bio-agent container.

Upon seeing the captain bars, someone shouted out. "Officer on deck!" Every single trooper straightened, a near involuntary reaction at seeing an officer rank and/or the call to attention.

"At ease." Said a voice behind the ODS'Ts, making them all jump slightly. When they turned to face the voice, they found themselves looking at their platoon leader. Major Hadjit Striker, he was easily into his sixties but thanks to the miracle of modern medicine he looked as though he was in his mid-forties. A veteran of the Heretic war, he had gained the respect of every single last man and woman under his command, barring the new bloods. Approaching the hologram projectors, he began, "As you all know the colony of Shanix is currently under siege an unknown entity. We do not know the status of the colony, of its population centers or anything. The only things we do know are that the Orbital elevator has fallen and the the capital, Second Eden is currently under siege. Our missions is to drop in onto the city and assist in whatever way they can. They have been fighting nonstop since First Contact, and we are here to liberate the colony from whatever foothold these hostiles may have." He looked at many of his troopers as he could. "Any questions?"

"Sir, you said that the hostiles were unknowns?"

"Correct. It seems that the local garrison had a First Contact scenario that went much the same way as it did at Harvest." A few mutters passed through the ranks, before he dropped the bombshell. "There are two alien species, and recently I have received intel about them and their apparent powers." More than a few bewildered and quizzical looks were quickly directed to him.

"Sir what are you talking about? What powers?"

"I don't know, what intel I got showed that these unknowns possess some sort of energy manipulation ability." With that an image of a reptilian looking creature appeared, the video started to play, soon the alien was wrapped in a cloak of blue-black energy, it threw its hand forward, a sphere of energy flew from its hand. The sphere impacted a colonial marine, throwing him backwards; another video started playing where another marine was flung forward toward one of the aliens.

Taking a step back from the group, he walked toward the armory nearing the drop pods, "I know many of you want to simply drown these aliens in a pool of their own blood but that is not why we are here." He picked up an MA5-D rifle, "We are here for one purpose and one purpose only: we are here to take back Shanix from the arrogant fools who think they can take what belongs to the UNSC!" He shouted, getting roars of approval.

"They have been fighting cops, civilians, and soldiers! They think they have nothing to fear, they think that they can win!" The rage coming off the marines was thick in the air.

"But we are ODS'T! We are the Elite! The rest of our friends will be going down in dropships, enjoying tea and crumpets, and listening to fine music all the way, but not us! How are we leaving this ship boys and girls?!"

It was not planned, it was not tradition, but it was something burned

into the minds and souls of all ODSs, from the new recruit to the experienced officer, gained through drops they all shared, they all knew the question and they all knew the answer as one: "WE GO FEET FIRST SIR!"

"Damn straight! Now shove a cork in your asses and get in your pods. As of this moment, only two kinds of aliens are staying in this planet: the dead, and those who are going to die! Now get moving!"

"HOO RAH!"

All the ODSs soon dispersed, each heading to their own individual pods, sliding in and securing the hatch. Within minutes over a thousand ODSs throughout the ship had entered their pods, now dangling over open air from the bowels of the ship.

The radio crackled to life and the Major's voice came over the comm. "We are dropping into Hell! Get ready to fly Marines!"

Soon they pods dropped and hundreds of men and women began hurtling toward the surface of Shanix. Every single one of them with only one thing on their minds: making the enemy regret ever coming to Shanxi, and having them pay in blood.

****APUFMKII****

Back on the Obelisk of Turipa, Desolas was watching in both fascination and fear as he watched three of the unknown warships, one of them outsizing his own dreadnought made their way towards the planet. Moments later, unleashing an apparent barrage on the planet below as it fired what were likely missiles from it's 'belly'. "I need to know where that ordinance is heading, anyone have an answer?"

"Sir, tracking trajectory of objects; they're heading right to the largest city of the planet. But, I don't think they're missiles sir, or even bombs."

Desolas raised an eye-ridge at that. It didn't make sense for anyone to fire that many pods, or whatever they were, at a single target if they didn't expect them to do any damage. But if they weren't missiles, then what were they? It's not as though they were firing soldiers out in those pods. "Well whatever they may be, alert our forces on the ground that they have, something, incoming. Torsk can handle the command of our forces on the ground, ours is going to be up here." 'Which is easier said than done', he thought to himself. Though he didn't show it, he was terrified by what he was seeing: multiple ships that were three times the length of a most Council dreadnoughts, and one that defied classification. The apparent alien flagship, it could be little else, was seven times the length of his own ship, and looked as though it could just plow over his own ship with little effort. He off-handedly noted that this would be classified as a the theoretical fortress-class warship: a ship that would be able to serve as mobile Citadel as it were.

Still, despite whatever objections he may have had, he did not feel too worried. If these ships, despite their different design, were anything like that first alien ship they had encountered, they would be able to win this fight. Not easily, but they would, and it would

take considerable coordination and ordinance. "Order groups Censta and Droh to engage the aliens. Tell them to stay in formation and attack the smaller targets first, focus their fire and avoid whatever comes at them. Use their FTL drives to close the distance once they can."

The respective groups signalled their assent and began moving towards the alien fleet, unknowingly flying straight forward to their deaths. As the ships made their way towards the alien fleet, the lead ships, the super-dreadnought-length vessels and the fortress-class, each fired two missiles at the approaching forces group, six in all. The missiles evading the GARDIAN lasers with aplomb until they reached the center of each group. Then, for the briefest of moments, six suns lit up the darkness.

****APUFMKII****

Back on the Era, as thousands of Drop-pods rained onto the planet, De La Rosa watched impassively as the Kali nuclear missiles enveloped the enemy in balls of nuclear fire. Over two dozen enemy ships had been caught in the blast. The majority of them corvettes, along with two frigates. No survivors.

As the balls of fire dissipated, the Rear Admiral ordered, "All ships, engage. Proceed to your targets." From the UNSC fleet, more than half the frigates began moving away from the group and heading towards the planet. Each of them on different paths than the carrier and escorts sent earlier. Their task was to provide support and supplies for the beleaguered defenders below. The destroyers, led by the newly named Heracles, charged forth in a wolf pack. Their H-MACs firing with deadly accuracy the moment any ships entered their range.

And as the enemy soon learned, these cannons possessed a far greater lethality than those of the aging Marathon. A half dozen streaks of hot metal raced across the stars towards their targets. Any ship struck by these rounds were gutted as the round passed from bow to stern, or cracked in half as they struck midline of the ships. Whether they were of the angular design or the flying blocks of metal; the only difference was who had the larger wrecks. Some were clean misses, other scraping what the aliens considered shields. Popping them in a display of arcing electricity as it was thrown about by the transfer of energy. Within moments over a dozen ships were out of the fight.

And the aliens had yet to make another move.

Then, as if shocked into action, the alien vessels began forming into their own wolf-packs and moving towards the UNSC vessels. Trying to close the distance between the two groups. All the while, the destroyers kept picking off the alien vessels from a distance. The Admiral watched all this from the bridge with a dispassionate look as his ships decimated the enemy's. 'This is too easy. De La Rosa said these aliens had short-distance capable FTL drives. So why haven't they-' A small ripple streaked across the shield in front of the bridge, followed by another. "Solera, report."

"Impacts are reading as low-power Mass accelerator shots and some sort of unknown ordinance. I'm guessing it was an antimatter charge. Shields are holding at 98%." She paused as she manipulated the center

table on the bridge. Her snarl not having dissipated in the least, the display showed the entire battlespace around Shanxi. The UNSC warships were utterly annihilating the alien warships at range. The battle was far from a completely one sided fight. "Mostly likely pot-shots than an actual strike, but we have other problems." On the display, several of the UNSC ships were highlighted. Apparently, several ships, either in a fit of bloodlust or seeking glory had split off from their groups, charging off on their own, and had paid the price.

Three Rider-Class light frigates and two Montreal-Class Heavy-Frigates floated dead in space. Their hulls breached and precious atmosphere pouring out from great rents in the hulls. "Solera, how the hell did this happen?" De La Rosa demanded, "What happened to them?"

"Apparently, someone remembered on their side remembered their FTL engines. We got packs of ships picking off the ones that are isolating themselves." With a wave of her hand, a video of just how the aliens managed to take down the UNSC vessels was shown. "The main guns on the hostile vessels are nowhere near our cannons, but they can fire a hell of a lot faster." On the video, one of Montreal-class, the Oasis, was surrounded by alien vessels as they brought themselves in close using their FTL drives, right before they cut loose with their main guns. The shields of the Oasis lit up as they intercepted the rounds, with Archer missiles and autocannons letting loose on the enemy vessels. Several alien ships were knocked out of commission by the combined fire, but the majority evaded the attack. "Once they get in close, our ships can't use their MACs, and from what I've seen, we'd need at least a cruiser's amount of autocannons to pierce their shields using them alone." Solera commented. In the video, the Oasis's shield's popped. A second later, it was gutted as the alien vessels added their own missiles to the barrage, gutting the ship but leaving it largely intact. The alien ships were wrapped in a blue aura, altering their heading. But before they could vanish, five were decimated as H-MAC shells struck them amidship, utterly destroying them. The others vanished before repairing several tens of thousands miles away.

"Damn it, get everyone back into their formations, I-"

"Already done," Solera added, but it's too late." As to emphasize her point, a Midway-Class destroyer, the Heart of Sparta started to tumble in space as it was attacked by no less than a dozen corvettes-tonnage ships and another three frigates and one of the cruiser-tonnage. Each had some sign of damage, either lucky survivors from the Hornet Mines, or part of Hunter-Killer Pack that had taken down four of five downed UNSC warships. They had been using their FTL drives and sublight engines to rapidly close the distance between themselves and their targets. The Sparta's hull flare in pockets as it attempted to use its chemical boosters to reorient itself. As it was turning, dozens of antimatter missiles struck along the length of its hull. Explosions strafed the side of the warship, missiles detonated inside their tubes, triggering a chain of explosions, reaching its reactor. The detonation of the reactor sheared the Sparta in two. Bodies and scrap floated out from the wreck.

The Era of Retliation herself, though right in the middle of the battle, was no yet in the thick of it. All of the alien ships had given her a wide berth. Staying as far as possible from it. "Damn it!

Order the other ships to stay in their formations and pick their targets. Don't let them get separated! As for us, we're taking out those wolfpacks. Solera, I want our gun-decks directed right at the thickest cluster of enemy vessels! Find their flagships!"

Solera nodded. "Understood. All hands, brace for hard rotation." Across the ship, chemical boosters placed at key points Engaged. The sheer force of the boosters began rotating the five point seven kilometer warship faster than normal. Within seconds what was once the 'top' was now the 'bottom', as all orientation was relative to one's point of view in space.

And displaying its most heavily armed vector, barring its bow, to the enemy.

****APUFMKII****

On the Son of Kalros, Torsk was looking what could only be akin to glee as he saw the aliens engaging the ragtag fleet he and Desolas had called in with all their favors. "HAH HAH! This! Is a true battle!" Roaring his approval, a bloody thirsty grin slapped across his face. Even as the alien warships began to tear into the motley fleet. "My warriors, for centuries I have promised you all the fight that you all desire! The battle of a lifetime! And now I finally fulfill my vow!" Thunderous cheers filled the bridge and speakers, even as their compatriots were being destroyed around them.

"Sir, a request to open a communication line from the Obelisk, its Desolas himself!" Torsk huffed an affirmative, not taking his eyes off the battle and directing ships as needed.

The dulcet tones of Desolas blared through the speakers, "Torsk! We have to fall back! We need to leave the system, we don't know what we are trifling with!" The turian commander was obviously in a state of fear and near panic, which was understandable, in the face of what seemed to be overwhelming odds. "Torsk, do you hear me?" Said krogan motioned for the officer to cut the line, ending the discussion before it could begin.

"You may have lost your quad turian, but I still remember what it means to be a krogan. And now, I will make my ancestors proud." With that he threw himself back into the battle, directing as many ships to the dark side of the planet as he threw at the enemy.

Back on the Turipa, Desolas slammed a fist against a nearby console in anger. "Damnable fool! Doesn't he realize what's going on?" In his eyes, unlike his krogan compatriot, the battle was not something that they could brute force their way, not with the ragtag forces they had, but if they fell back into Council space, perhaps they could spin a tale and get the whole of the Council's Might to bear on this new species." But until then, we can't-" He was cut off as alarms began to blare on the deck, signalling a potential lock on their location their location. Which didn't make sense as he had made sure that their ships were a considerable distance from the battle. "Report!"

"Sir, we've got several contact's coming in! Cruiser-size vessels their advancing on our position!" As if to emphasize his point, the deck shuddered, knocking anyone not in a security harness of their feet, several consoles began sparking from energy surges. "Get a

group tasked for those cruisers! I want them taken out before sundown!"

"Sirs, Hexilion pack has been assigned. They're moving in and," The officer paused, not believing what they were hearing.

"And what?" Desolas snapped out.

"Sir, the alien cruisers, they're, they're backing off. Hexilion lead reports that they are breaking course and heading away from us!" Desolas felt his jaw go slightly slack. It didn't make any sense, why would they peel off like they did without reason? There was no way they could have realized that he would send someone to attack them in response.

"Show me." On one of the bridge's screen, Desolas watched as he was given a live-feed of the front of his ship. As the officer said, two of the alien vessels had been approaching their position and now were heading on a vector that went away or around them. But why? Then, he realized something, "Check their previous vectors, follow them back, in a straight line. Tell me if there's something behind them."

At his command several officers began to frantically search until one finally answered, "Sir! it's that massive unknown vessel, it's presenting it's broadside in our direction!" On the screen, the image of the ship was magnified and could be seen clearly.

'It's broadside?' Desolas thought, 'Why would it do that? It only presents us a bigger target.' As the fortress-class alien warship completed it's rotation, the turian's eyes widened in realization. "By the spirits!" Helmsman! Full power to the engines, get us moving away from our current position at a downwards angle! Sharp as you can manage! Comms! Order the other ships to do the same!" The ship lurched as the officers obeyed without hesitation, an response that saved all their lives as just as the Obelisk of Turipa began to gather speed on its downward arc, the broadside of the alien warship spat out a wall of fiery death as all her guns opened fire.

The Obelisk's position had been reinforced by the entirety of her original force from the first patrol, along with another dozen cruisers and frigates from the favors that Desolas and Torsk had called in. Of the perhaps three dozen ships in that formation, only about half of those from the original patrol followed the strange commands by Desolas as soon as they received them. The rest

The moment the veritable wall of fire reached the ships, no one onboard had the time to scream in panic as hot metal just ripped through the ships like they were little more than paper. Ripping through effortlessly and tearing the ships and those within to pieces through sheer volume of fire. A single salvo from the guns eviscerated the ships in it's firing line to the point where the largest piece of wreckage was no bigger than a turian, if that. In a single strike, over thirty ships were utterly destroyed by one ship.

As Desolas witnessed the utter carnage that the alien fortress class vessel unleashed in a single salvo, he knew that only course of action remained. One that he so desperately desired that it was not that case, but he quickly realized that he brought it upon himself. "I may have started a war, simply because of my own greed and

ambition. I will pay for my actions in some way or another, but I will be damned before I surrender the lives of those under my command in a needless slaughter. My only saving grace be that none of my soldiers are on the planet right now." He said to himself.

As he looked to his crew, they all looked back at him, waiting for his orders whatever they may be. 'Good turians, all of them. Better than I deserve.' He thought to himself. As he took a deep breath, he considered just what he was about to do, would do to his future. His choice would forever be a black mark both upon him, and his family. One that would stay for an unknown number of generations, but still, when he spoke, he did so loudly and clearly. "Order the retreat."

4. Shanix: Contact, Conflict, Tragedy: Edit

Alternate Past Uncertain Future MKII

Thank you to my friend and fellow writer EspionageDB7 as he is known on deviantart. For letting me use a member of his family as the inspiration and core of General Williams. It is my honor, and I truly hope I have done him justice.

Chapter 4: Edited

Posted 8/13/2014

**Shanxi: Contact, Conflict, Tragedy**

Second Eden, Shanxi

Number of Days since First Contact: 0

Brigadier General Bertoldo Williams, despite being almost 75 years old, sprinted with the speed of a seasoned marine to the command center of the Shanxi's Colonial Defense Force Headquarters located in the heart of Second Eden. He had been in his office when one of his officers had slammed open the door. Before the general could even get a word in sideways, the officer had told alerted how several civilian ships were making the transition from vacuum to atmosphere, all the while screaming about 'another Covenant War' and 'alien invaders.'

Sliding to halt as he reached the commander center, he began barking out orders, "Someone get those civvies to calm down and get down planetside! Get them on the horn and figure out just what the hell is going on!" As the officers began to carry out his orders, he added, "And contact all major settlements and CDF forces; tell them to prepare for Harvest Rain Contingency."

The entire command center froze at the last word, some actually gaping at their commanding officer. Harvest Rain was the name of the protocol in the event of First Contact with an hitherto unknown alien species. And only in the event said species was likely hostile. When it had been written up by the CDF as little more than a formality. Never intended to see an actual use.

Under Harvest Rain, all settlements which did not possess a strong enough CDF contingent was to make their way to either Second Eden, or

one of many deep-underground bunkers scattered across the planet. Many of the bunkers were in the settlements themselves, but the vast majority were scattered across the countryside as many people had established farms or private homes and estates far from the main settlements.

As for Second Eden itself, as a city, it was one of the largest on the planet, and had been built directly into a mountainside. The mountain itself had been carved by nature so that there was a great cut into the mountain side. Allowing the side to be protected from three directions by the mountains themselves, and the edge of the city provided a great deal of protection itself. Sheer drops existed along the length of the mountain line. Making it so that the only way to reach the city or the carved out mountain side was by one of several bridges spanning the gap or by air.

"Well then? Get the word out! If we have to enact Harvest Rain I want it done as fast possible!" William's words shocked the entire command center into action, the officers present working to carry out their commander's orders with speed. As he watched them carry out their tasks, Williams whispered to himself, "Please, let me be wrong and this order becomes a black mark on my record."

"Sir!" The general picked his head up at the call. Turning to the one who called him, they said, "We've got new contact. IFF tag identifies as CDF cruiser _Right of Way_"

'Finally, some answers.' He thought to himself. "Open up a channel to them, pronto!"

"Sir, scans of the cruiser reveals signs of battle damage. Heavy impacts along its hull. Detecting multiple hull breaches and antimatter damage!" Another officer called out. "Receiving reports from their AI, they have multiple hull breaches but are still combat effective."

William's eyes widened at the report. The _Way _may have been an aging cruiser by modern standards, but even so it was one of the most powerful ships ever laid by the hand of man. 'Just in blazes did you people run into out there?' Having a moment to actually think, if only for a second, he recalled that the only civilian ships that were out in space over Shanxi were either automated freighters or the civilian science teams that had recently been given permission to more closely examine the alien artifact on the edge of Shanxi's sensor range. Had they found something? Were they at war again?

Shaking his head of the thought, he turned back to the officers. "Alright change of plans. All settlements are to alerted, Harvest Rain is in effect. All forces are to report to CDF and UNSC bases ASAP and ready up to combat level alpha! I want our AA guns up and online now!"

"Sir, channel is open to the _Right of Way_. Bringing feed on the main screen."

'About damn time.' Williams thought, as the screen began to display the feed. "What the hell is going on out there? I've got civilian ships panicking about a 'New Covenant' and 'invading armies'. Just what the hell did you people find?"

The feed finally began to clear up, and the face of the _Way_'s captain finally appeared. "Sir, I can't tell you how relieved I am to hear your voice. We have encountered a new hostile alien race, I repeat they are hostile. Their guns don't got much punch but they got the numbers sir. I'm leaking atmosphere, got multiple hull breaches and damn sure these guys are not far behind."

"Calm down Zarais. Harvest Rain protocol is already in effect." Glancing at the officer in charge, he got a thumbs up for confirmation. "Get your ass within the grid captain. And we'll give these alien bastards a Welcome to Shanxi package." A feral grin plastered on the general's face. 'Teach these aliens that humanity is not going to allow itself to be push around.'

"Glad to hear that sir. We're moving into range of the defense grid. Be advised, our slipspace drives are disengaged. I repeat, slipspace drives are disengaged and we can not jump to FTL."

That got the barest of responses out of the general, in so far his eyes only widened. Inside though, he, like everyone else who knew the basics of slipspace drive mechanics were in shock. 'Just what is going on?' Realizing what for what the captain's words were, Williams asked, "Well long as you plan on sticking around, mind dropping whatever you extra ordinance you got on that boat of yours my way? I think we're going to need it." Both men could see the hidden message for what it was: hoping for the best, but preparing if the situation went seriously FUBAR.

"Understood sir." The captain's image stopped being projected and the display soon focused only on Shanxi. On the holodisplay, red lines began reaching out from the symbols representing each of the ODPs. Each line targeting one vessel each, as the cannons fired, a blue dot disappeared from the TacMap. Despite his surprise at two of the unknown vessels avoiding the shots of the ODPS, he chalked it up to more as luck than skill. Soon the ODPs holographic representations flashed as it marked their firing upon the newly placed red marks at the end of their maximum range. Red lines marked the flight path of their shots. One red mark disappeared from the display than another, the third red line simply continued into the void. Williams smirked, thinking that the platforms would pick off the new aliens before they came even close.

Then, things went wrong. The General's mouth fell open in shock at what happened next. "What?" His reaction was mirrored by all who were watching the TacMap as the unknown vessels disappeared from the TacMap then reappeared. All behind the minimum cones of fire of the ODPs, everyone could only watch in shock as the IFF transponders representing each of the ODPs stopped transmitting as each station was destroyed before they could react. Each station lost was the death hundreds of men and women stationed on them. A Lieutenant watching the TacMap whispered, "Good god!"

Snapping out of his shock, the General started snapping off new orders, "Get on the horn and tell everyone we got incoming, I want all our troops and armor deployed five minutes ago and get the civilians inside the bunkers now! Tell all outer cities and bases to be ready to evac to Second Eden at a moment's notice. Do it now!" He hoped all this would be enough, it was bad enough he didn't know what he was facing, but the fact he had civilians to protect made it all

the worse.

'Sun Tzu was right, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.'" The only question now is, how many will we lose?' And Williams did not look forward to the answer.

****Tero City****

****Tero City****

In the city, a group of young men and women, eight in total, were running full tilt down the street towards the local starport. "So," One of them, Terrence Heldin, 'Hood' as he was called by his friends, a joking reference to commander of the UNSC, started, "Any idea why shore leave was cut so early?"

"No idea." Another, a young woman named Katy Geran, answered. She was the go-getter of the group. You need help, or needed something, she'll help you, or at least find you a way to get out of whatever troubles you found yourself in. "But I'm putting my money on Alexei." Pointing her thumb at the one trailing behind them. "Alexei's in trouble with the captain again!" She added in a sing-song voice.

"Oh ha ha Katy." Answered Alexei Rasnub, his voice thick with his Russian Accent despite colonial upbringing. He was the biggest of the group, standing at 6 and half feet or almost 2 meters. If any of them ever need serious help, he was the one they called. Yet despite his rough exterior, was labeled as the 'Group Teddy Bear', hiding a kind soul underneath his rough appearance. They still joked about how they found out about his ability to design wedding dresses. An ability, he blamed, on his older and younger sisters, being the only boy among 5 children. Along with being bullheaded on occasion. "If anything it's probably Maho's fault."

"Me! What did I do?" The youngest of the group, Maho Febeor, was the company wisecrack. He was always making jokes on just about everything: ticking off the other troopers and his superiors as often as he made them laugh. Despite all that, he was a crack-shot. The best of them at least, and possibly the best on the whole planet, claiming the record for longest target shot at multiple miles, hitting a target the size of a playing card. "Oh come on, why is it always my fault?"

"Because it often is." Cris Lee, their resident tech expert. He could've had a full-scholarship and paid trip back to Sol with his choice of any school back on Earth. Instead, he joined the UNSC. He gained immense respect from his fellows after he had demonstrated his tech skills and had hacked into the one of the officer's terminals and exposed his 'discrediting' actions. Particular among the women of the group due to nature of said 'actions'. "You cause more trouble than the rest of us combined. Even Squid."

Squid'de Qurad or 'Squid' as he was known by his friends was among the only half dozen or so of Sangheili on the entire planet. He gained his nickname when he first introduced himself and someone butchered the pronunciation and soon after, the name stuck. Despite that, he found himself in good company in the UNSC, and even better friends.

He and several others of his friends from Sanghelios joined the UNSC as a gag. But unlike his other friends, took the duty seriously. And at his request, been reassigned to a Colony planet, due to unlike most others of his race, he was more pacifist in nature than most. Not to say he hated fighting, no his friends, and their bruises, could attest to that. Though due to him being Sangheili had to deal with some Xenophobes, but found his friends, the ones he was traveling with, coming to his defense whenever it occurred. "It is true, small one. You are indeed both a source of trouble and entertainment."

"He is right you know." Serana Ke'dar added. Another Sangheili, she was one of few who had decided to join the military. However, as Sangheili society was still largely patriarchal, it was much easier to join the UNSC then the Spear of Sangheili, the Sangheili Military Forces. "You do cause a lot of trouble. Remember that little trick shot you tried to pull off last week? The one where you took a joyride on a Pelican taking off and tried to snipe the Sergeant's coffee mug?"

"It wasn't even close to his face!" He yelled. "Sure he almost lost a few fingers but he's still fine."

"No. It's something much bigger." The oldest of them, Mich Zao, "I just got off the comm. with my brother. He's says the brass at Second Eden is mobilizing everything on the planet." His family had a long line of people with military service; he was just the latest among generations in a military centered family. At everyone's disbelief he reconfirmed what he said. "Yes, he said that everyone and I mean everyone, including reserves and the local militia has been told to report in. There's been mass deployment and he just received news that a cruiser was going to drop off its entire contingent before heading out."

"A whole cruiser?" Are you serious?" Hood asked. A cruisers full complement of troops, vehicles, munitions and other supplies would enough to arm a colony the size of Shanxi twice over. At least. "What the hell would we need all that firepower for?"

"Yes, I am curious as well." Squid added. "I do not-" He stopped. Not just mid-speech but stopped entirely. Noticing this, the others did as well.

"Squid? What are you doing? Come on we got to go."

"Do you not hear it?" He was looking up, searching the skies for something.

"What are you talking about? Come on Squid lets go." At this point Alexei tried to pull on his friend's shoulder when the Sangheili stopped him and snarled.

"Stop and listen! Do you not hear it!" This time, the entire group stopped, along with most of the street. Slowly but surely, there was a low thrumming noise that, as they listened, became louder.

"What is that? Is that a Pelican or an Osprey?" Cris asked. "Or is one of your ships Squid?"

"Well it's not human. Human ships are louder, and I would recognize

any of them." Mich said. He worked with the Navy boys and the mechanics in his spare time.

"And it is not of Sangheili origin either." Serana added. "I do not hear the workings of an anti-grav generator." That meant it was not any of the insurrectionists or Instruments. Nor Kig-Yar pirates or Unggoy mercenaries.

"Then what is it?" They kept searching, as the sounds got louder and more widespread. "Well whatever it is, it's getting closer. And a lot of them by the sound of it." Hood said. The clouds grew darker, a shadow appeared in the skies. First one then two, and another, soon the skies were filled with shadows: the silhouettes of whatever cast them, and numbered in the dozens. They soon got their answer. Dropships, scores of them came out from the skies.

But it was a design not seen before; some were triangular, the three sided-shape possessing a heavy influence in their designs, while the others were little more than flying boxes. "They're landing in the Temura Square. Come on; let's see what's going on." The others agreed and began moving, the square was in the same general direction as the starport, but they still needed to make several detours to reach the square. By the time they arrived, several of the unknowns ships had landed, forming a defensive circle. But as of yet, none had disembarked.

"What's going on?" The local police forces had arrived long before and had taken positions around the circle and were in the process of ushering civilians away. "Hey, you kids!" They turned to see a SWAT officer, decked out in full armor and carrying an M-96 Combat Shotgun across his back approaching them. "What are you doing? Get out of here and go back to your homes until we sort this all out."

"We're CDF, we came to see if we could help." Katy told the officer.

"All of you?" The officer raised a brow in suspicion, even those two? Referring to the Sangheili pair with them. "Thought Sangs weren't allowed in the UNSC. Speaking of which, if you are, you know what's going on?"

"We don't know either. Just that everyone's been called back to base. They're mobilizing but what for we don't know."

The officer nodded. "Right in that case, you better get to the starport. Heard all the military-" He stopped at hearing the whirring of gears. The doors to the ships began to open. "Alright people, party's starting. Hold your fire until I say so." From the angular vessels tall, lean creatures stepped out, carrying weapons of unseen design: sleeker and smoother than most, comparable to weapons of the Sangheili. They possessed avian features, their skin shined slightly in the sun. Speaking in clicks and chirps. From the others, taller, muscular reptilian creatures stepped forth. Possessing large crests on their heads, like the dinosaurs of old, their skin scaly like so. Possessing large humps, and their features grim and filled with rage and bloodlust. Their snarls and grunts filling the people around the square with fear. And their weapons, designed not with sleek and grace, but rather power and brutality.

"Squid. Cris. You guys recognize these guys? What are they?" Maho

asked.

"I do not know. Never in our history have the people of Sanghelios ever encountered such creatures. Though I relish the opportunity to fight the ones with the scaled heads." Serana answered.

"Never saw anything in the Forerunner databases either. Least not what's been uncovered so far." Cris added. Though Humanity as the 'Reclaimers' as labeled by the Monitors of the Forerunner installations that had been discovered, were granted access to most of the services within each installation, their access was largely limited still.

The tension was so thick; it could have been cut with a dull knife. The SWAT officer stepped forward. His shotgun still slung across his back, but his hand resting on the M6-D series Magnum pistol sidearm. "Greetings I am Officer Samuel Uras. And I welcome you to Shanix."

"What the hell is he doing?" The others agreed with the shock in his voice. To them, and many others, it appeared to be suicide.

"He's trying to be diplomatic. What I'm wondering is, why is he doing this? Shouldn't it be a politician there? You know, less of a loss that way?"

Along the square however, the various officers and SWAT members were getting nervous. The larger creatures were spreading out, as were their more avian fellows. Their weapons raised, and their speech, though they could not understand it, even those with Universal translator implants, sounded threatening and their grips on their weapons tightened.

One of the aliens, the more avian species stepped forth. This one possessed matte black armor, the obvious leader of the group, approaching the SWAT officer. It spoke in clicks and chirps like the others of its species, none of which the officer understood, but thankful was holding its odd rifle in a nonthreatening manner.

Nearby, one of the reptilian aliens had begun to argue with one of the avian aliens, and if their actions were any indication, understood one another. One of them was waving their gun around, while the other was obviously trying to calm them down. The people only got ever more fearful, and one of the new guys on the force had his finger close to the trigger.

The officer and the alien seemed to be trying to communicate but obviously failing. The officer was trying to gesture for the alien to follow him while said alien was trying to get the officer to hand over, if what it was pointing at was any indicator, the officer's shotgun. When the alien made to grab the officer, he stepped back, and raised his hand. "Whoa. Hold it there. Now we don't understand each other but I'm not too keen on being that friendly yet." His one sniper unit clicked his comm.

"Sir, should we open fire.?"

"Negative. Hold your fire. So far they've done nothing."

"Alright sir but I,-Watch out!" The sniper had noticed one of the larger aliens approach his superior weapon in hand. The sniper didn't even think. He just trained his crosshair on the alien's cranium and pulled the trigger.

The alien's crest did not slow down the 14.5 by 114mm Fin Stabilized Discarding Sabot round at all. Piercing through the alien's head cleanly, the report of the sniper rifle echoes through the square. And then, silence.

Then everyone began opening fire. The alien that had approached the officer began to raise its rifle and pulled the trigger. However Uras had already begun moving after the first shot, pulling his pistol as he went. When the alien opened fire, the rounds struck nothing but air. Uras fired his pistol once; an orange barrier shimmered as it was struck by the 12.7mm HE round. Uras fired again, twice, three times, until the barrier shattered and fired a fifth round, striking the alien in the head, crumpling as it fell. Around him though, his subordinates were not having the same luck as he did. Some were destroyed by the crested aliens' immense weapons, tearing their bodies apart in a single blast, while others were picked off by concentrated and controlled fire from the avian aliens' rifles. Some fell riddled with bullets, others seemed to catch fire. Others, parts of their body snapped-froze on impact with the alien munitions, some were unlucky enough to have limbs shattered from the unknown rounds then successive fire.

The unlucky few were simply rammed by the crested alien; charging forward, taking fire head on: charging through a group of officers, the luckiest getting away with a broken limb, the worst been smashed into a nearby wall. The aliens were also taking casualties; their one sniper kept picking off whoever was unlucky enough to be caught out in the open, remaining unscathed in his post several hundred yards away, spraying brain matter and bodies all over the square. While others were taken down by concentrated fire either by 12.7mm magnum fire or from 7.62mm rounds from the few other SWAT officers' old MA5 Series rifles. The crested aliens fell after a barrage of weapon's fire, their bodies gained several dozen kilos in bullets, falling mere meters from the officers' feet. Those who tested and proven themselves on the firing range proved their skills in combat, taking out the avian aliens with precision fire from cover. One shot, two shots, three and four, dropping shields, severing limbs and destroying weapons and popping heads with precision fire. It was hell, it was bloody, and for some it was glorious. But for the officers, it was simply duty. And that duty was to protect the civilians.

While the majority fought, the few who didn't, rather than cower as most would assume, presented their backs to the aliens. They were directing civilians away from the square and towards evacuation stations, making themselves easy targets. But more than a few of the aliens opened fire on the crowd, or at least tried too. Officers and a few other brave souls who saw the aliens aiming towards them, turned themselves into living shields, taking as many rounds as they could before they fell, most who attempted to aim at the crowd were obliterated by concentrated fire before they could pull the trigger.

On the side of the aliens, any wounded in between the two sides found themselves saved by their comrades more often than not. More than a

few charged out into the lines of fire, risking themselves to save the wounded. Spraying rounds without regard, just to create an opening to retrieve their injured fellow.

The group of eight had taken cover behind some cars the moment the first shot was fired. "Shit! Well now we know they're hostiles." Maho yelled. The others agreed. "So anyone got a plan?" Suggestions were made by most to either head for the starport or head to the police station and get some arms, the former taking majority. Of the group though, Cris wasn't paying attention but rather looking towards the firefight, specifically at the aliens' weapons.

"Interesting," He noticed how the weapons did not eject any sort of shell casings as they fired so they were not conventional projectile weaponry like those employed by the UNSC, neither were they energy weapons: their projectiles, when they struck, did not cause a burning effect like plasma based weapons tech did. However when fired too often, the shooter had to stop as heated air blasted out the sides of the weapon. "Hmm."

Someone grabbed his shoulder, acting on instinct; he spun moving to strike when he recognized Katy. "Cris, come on let's go." He nodded; the eight of them couldn't do anything to help the police who were being overwhelmed. They had to leave and link up with the command at Second Eden. Failing that, get whatever intel they could back to them. But as he looked over his shoulder, taking one last look at the carnage behind him, he muttered, "This will be but one battle of another great war."

****APUFMKII****

Back in Second Eden, officers were running around as they relayed reports to the general and each other. Everything from evacuation and bunker statuses, to enemy landing zones and friendly forces deployment and reports from newly established front lines.

Even as he gave the response orders, Williams couldn't help but think, when he had a moment, about the colony itself. Unlike the vast majority of the UNSC/UEG efforts when it came to colonizing after the wars, which were almost totally reclamation, reintegration and terraforming, Shanxi had been built purely from scratch. And was meant to be a bastion of hope and a sign that the endless conflict was finally over.

Still, humanity had learned its lesson from the Great War, and had built Second Eden as a massive stronghold on the planet, as well as it's capital, just in case. The city itself having built to withstand a siege. A last bastion of defense or a safe haven in case of invasion, streets were designed to enhance asymmetrical warfare by the defenders, integrated deployable roadblocks had been installed in the roads themselves, bunker entrances for civilians were scattered throughout the city. And that was only the city itself.

Now it seemed that Shanxi would be the first marker in the history of another war.

Outside another series of explosions dotted the skies as enemy aircraft were shot down by Second Eden's powerful defense grid, their remains scattered across the city. On rooftops and specifically designated buildings, Anti-Aircraft systems of all types ranging from

missiles and Gatling guns to autocannons and Onager Mass Drivers protected the skies above the city.

An alien corvette pair had already learned the hard way that the city would not fall easily from the skies. Not without a strike from orbit. The city possessed a grand total of three Onager Mass Driver cannons, and each one could be remotely or manually controlled and right now, their controllers had already drawn up an impressive killstreak. Striking down both individual craft, and of course, their 'trophy' kills from before.

Earlier before, two alien corvettes had tried to subjugate Second Eden. Needless to say, they failed miserably.

Both had approached the city from the west, rather than straight down for whatever reason. Letting a small fighter group fly as their vanguard. Perhaps to weaken the city. Whatever their purpose, the fighters soon found themselves turning into shrapnel as 120mm flak cannons and 66mm autocannons opened fire the moment they had entered ranging. The wrecks crashing into buildings or into streets. When the alien ships had seen their fighter escort taken down, they had rushed forward. Their shields quickly lighting up as autocannons, flak guns and everything else began to open fire, only to be stopped by whatever shields the alien's had.

Then, the Onagers had come into play. Set into a triangle array, the Onagers had been hidden away inside specially designed structures to take everything short of a MAC strike. They turned themselves towards the corvettes, who were still unaware of the threat, their broadsides presenting clean targets.

Their coils glowing bright orange as they charged up. The bright light perhaps drew the attention of the corvettes, who were now trying to clear the roof tops of the AA emplacements with their weapons. Or perhaps not. It made little difference.

With a massive **_**clank**_**, three fifteen centimeter shells traveling at a many times the speed of sound, slamming into the corvette's with enough force to push them. Not satisfied with having just shoved the invaders, the coils of the onagers whirred to life again, firing off a second lethal volley, shattering the shields and pushing them to the sides again.

One of the corvette's immediately began to pull straight up, attempting to get out of the line of fire of the Onagers. The operators, not willing to let their quarry get away so easily, fire off another volley, scarcely missing the craft by scant meters.

Its companion had not been so lucky. Whether the captain simply panicked or not was unknown but the second corvette attempted to flee away from the city but instead of following it's companion and flying straight up, it had banked hard and turned away from the city.

Just as it began moving, a third volley struck the craft amidship. Causing it to start trailing smoke and fire as it left the edges of the city.

Irrated at the loss of one target, each of the three the Onager gunners had decided that this one would **_not_** get to see another day. In an incredible display of synergy, all three Onagers fired as one,

slamming straight into the rear of the corvette.

The three fifteen centimeter slugs gutted the engines of the ship, shearing two of them clean off, the debris falling into the chasm protecting the city.

The remaining engines flared brightly but with one engine, it could not defy Sir Isaac Newton. It crashed into the planet, its nosed crumpled from the impact, sliding across the dirt. Cheers hadn't even started before the wreck detonated in a bright blue flame, creating a crater some times the size of the ship itself. Even now after so many hours the wreck still burned. But that was just one victory, to so many losses.

Within hours of the alien ships breaching atmosphere, reports had been coming in of settlements being burned down to the ground or captured by the aliens. Most of these reports being either second hand or from those far from the actual scene. Williams had since authorized that "Any all means, methods and options are authorized to slow down the invaders." So far though, there had been no word of any bunker breaches. And hopefully they would stay that way.

But that was just about the only good news they had.

The greatest loss they had suffered was the Babel, their orbital lift capable elevator. The name was homage to the Tower of Babel in old religious texts, no one remembered who gave it the name but it stuck. Once it stretched high into the sky, delivering cargo supplies, people to and from the planet. It was an incredible sight. Modeled after the same orbital elevator based in New Mombasa, it had stood tall since the colony's beginning. Now it was just a dark strip across the land, its length having fallen to the side of its base. A dark mark across on the horizon. They had shattered its orbital station with their mass accelerators, without the station, the tower could not hold itself and soon collapsed.

He shuddered at how many lives were lost when the Babel fell. Officially, Second Eden was the colony's capital, being the center of the UNSC and CDF garrisons. And being the most militarily secure location, but the Babel was the unofficial, true capital of Shanxi. Everything, literally when through the Babel before reaching out to the rest of the planet, the population at the base of the Babel was higher than anywhere else on the planet. And that was where the aliens had struck hardest. They left Second Eden alone as it was a distance from the Babel and its Anti-Air defense grid

Yet for all this information, for all the intel he had gathered, he still did not know how these new aliens fought and so could not fight back. Insurrectionists employed hit-and-run tactics, to counteract them, all forces were on permanent alert and any insurrection attack was met with instantaneous overwhelming force. Against the Old Covenant and its genocidal remnants, they preferred overwhelming force so it was a war of attrition. But these aliens, he still had yet to gain a solid handle on their tactics and methods. He had been told that they had launched large numbers of dropships to many populated areas but had been unable to get any further information. Thankfully however, Second Eden's AA grid was keeping the alien's fighter forces at bay. And the prospect of defending the city made much easier by the windfall of supplies, troops and support from the now gone cruiser The Right of Way. Much of which he had sent to

closest of the population areas to assist in their defenses.

The veritable fleet of M12 LRVs and its variants had been sent around the city itself and outside it: to secure the city, recon the area and search for any trying to reach the city. He had gotten reports of a few contacts with the alien forces in the smaller towns, thankfully, as each group outside the city had one M12G1 LAAV "Gauss Hog" and its main cannon had made short work of any enemy they had encountered. M831 TT "Carriers" and D77H-TCI Pelican Dropships were sent to locations where any number of survivors were found or any settlements where the aliens had yet to arrive. At each of the primary entry points to the city were parked three M808B "Scorpion" MBTs. Yet even with all these supplies, this battle was going to be a tough slog.

An alert beeped and he looked at his tactical datapad attached to his wrist. It was a transmission from Tero city, one the closer and larger cities next to Second Eden. It read. "Unknown presence has landed. Unknown species is hostile, I repeat, Unknown species is hostile. High count of enemy infantry. Enemy command post being established. Starport is lost, repeat starport has been lost. Requesting support." He called over one of his junior officers, a young lieutenant. "Send out Delta and Echo companies to Tero City. Intel says enemy infantry is heaviest there. Deploy gunship squadrons: Seld, Ru and Ter. Reinforce all entrance points to the city with armored support. Prep all dropships and remaining gunships for rapid deployment." Whoever had decided to build Second Eden had the foresight to build it on a defensible area. The high ground of a plateau surrounded by crevices and backed into a mountain. The only two ways to enter Second Eden was through the air, or via one of nine ground bridges that spanned the crevices. 55mm Anti-Air emplacements around the city kept the skies above the city clear, and they had yet to experience any sort of ground assault. "And how long will that last?"

"Sir!" The general turned to see a trooper, a sergeant running towards him. What was strange was how this woman had obviously just come off the battlefield. "Sergeant Haley Sundry reporting sir!" She declared standing at attention.

"At ease." With that Haley looked as though she wanted to collapse. "What's going on sergeant? And where did you come from?"

"Sir. Intel on the enemy sir." She hand him a tacpad from her back, along with a single metallic strip that looked like it went around the wrist. "We couldn't get any transmissions out, they fried our transmitters with sort of overload pulse, we manage to get this off of one of their troopers." She said, gesturing to the metal strip. "We think it's their version of the tac-pad. We saw them tapping away it somehow, and it's how they also delivered the overload pulse. I came from Asp."

"With this?" He asked, also referring to the alien device she gave him. Though he did notice the small spikes in the inside area of the strip.

"Yes sir. It's some of hardlight emitter, like the holo-pads. I don't know how it works though."

He nodded. "Excellent job sergeant, but where's the rest of your

platoon?" He knew for a fact Asp was the city, well town considering its size, which was closest to the southern bridge passage. Due its proximity it rated at least a platoon's garrison.

"We pulled back sir. They overwhelmed our position with numbers and tactics. It's all on the tacpad." That was not a good sign. If they reached the Asp Bridge, then they would have to start pulling back, abandoning the other settlements and whoever was left behind.

"Well done Sergeant. Get yourself to medical, take a break for now." Before she could protest he added, "You don't have to worry; we have enough troopers to take over for you platoon. You're not going to do anyone any favors going into battle with one foot in the grave.

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir." She snapped off a quick salute before heading for Medical. Leaving the General with a tacpad and an alien device in his hands, and wondering just how many they would lose before help arrived.

A comm. officer called out to the General. "Sir, it's the Gadiel Bridge! They're under attack!" And just how long they could hold out.

****APUFMKII****

"By Allah, where did all these fucks come from?!"

"Hold your ground marines, hold your ground!"

"All tanks redirect fire to 45 degrees left side! I repeat 45 degrees left side! Focus on that damn tank!"

The troopers of the 205th Armored Division had been deployed to engage enemy armor approaching the bridge. They were one among few tank groups that had been with the now gone cruiser Right of Way. They had been deployed to try and set an outer perimeter outside of the city and clear a path to the closest settlements. Their fight was supposed to have been on open ground. Armored warfare. But the enemy had advanced far faster than any had expected. Even with the modifications and improvements done to technology over the years, armored warfare was still a slow and chaotic affair. The Scorpion M808B MBT(Main Battle Tank) was a sluggish if tough fighter. Anything short of a dedicated air strike, or heavy anti-armor weapons would have a difficult time punching through the armor and disabling the tank or killing its driver. They had believed the enemy, unknown though they were, would not reach the bridge until they were well past the bridge and on open ground.

They were wrong.

The moment the last tank in the column had come off the bridge they had come under attack. Rather than ambush the company as they were making their way across the bridge, the enemy had held fire until the last of the five tanks had crossed. Meaning only one thing: they planned on taking this bridge. If the aliens objective had simply been to wipe out their armor, then they would have fired while the tanks were on the bridge, either at the tanks or the bridge itself. Their armor vehicles were more like APCs considering how many of the larger, crested aliens had been disgorged from the vessel. Looking little more than several attached blocks on wheels, its cannons were

like dual Gauss cannons. Except far more powerful than anything Humanity possessed on such a small scale. It was capable of penetrating their armor with several shots and taking heavy fire in return: its armor plating a very tough contender. The few Warthogs that had escorted the tanks quickly moved off, taking out whatever infantry they could find, this was a heavy weight fight and they had no part in it.

Company Commander William Strife would be damned if he let any of these bastards cross the bridge into New Eden without a fight. "Move forward!" When the tank drivers and the rest of the company started bombarding him with protests and profanities he yelled back; "We can't stay here! We can either move in and fight, or we can fall back over the bridge. We charge, we might win! We fall back, and we risk the lives of everyone in the city." All the radio chatter stopped. He had just reminded them of the cost of failure. If they retreated, the enemy would have easier access to the city. If they fought, they might die, but the time they would buy would give the city the time it needed to bunker down and fortify the entrances to the city.

It was an easy choice.

The tank column charged forward, the M808B MBTs firing their 90mm M522 Smoothbore cannons. "All drivers; pick your targets and fire at will. Spread out. Good luck to you all." With that the tank column splintered, each heading towards their own targets. The enemy armor charged forward, their drivers eager for blood and battle. With that the battle was joined.

Micheal "Mike Mike" Alvarez pushed down on the throttle, forcing out as much speed as he could out of 'Serry' his tank. Bearing down on a mammoth of enemy armor. "Ok ok, let's get it on." Using his neural-net implant to interface with the turret controls he brought the turret around-"Ugh! Sonuva!" He felt the heavy rounds from the enemy armor's dual Gauss cannons slam into the sides of 'Serry'. "Where did that come from?" He yelled.

"Right side! Right side!" His gunner, Stevens Petroki cried out. Right before the air was filled with the noise of a 7.62mm machine gun firing on full auto. "Mike we need to get out of here!" The panic was clear in his voice, "We got these Shellheads coming towards us!"

"Shellheads?" When he interfaced with the turret's camera to get a better view of what his partner was talking about, he saw several humped aliens charging towards the tank, several of them wrapped in a blue ethereal glow, with another of the aliens armored vehicles behind them. One of them tossed a blue sphere towards the tank. It slammed into one of the tank's four track pods. A hissing noise could be heard as pieces of the armor fell off. His display read: 'Track pod 4: experiencing critical damage, please seek immediate refit and repair.'

"Damn it! Stevens take those bastards out! I'll take out that armor!" He tapped a side button, shifting the armor from standard HE, to AP Depleted Uranium sabot rounds. Bringing the aim on one of their armored ground vessels, he opened fire. The sabot round flew through the air, leaving behind its outer casing, leaving only a spike of depleted uranium flying through the air. It impacted the front of one of the alien vehicles. An orange shield shimmered in front, trying to

protect the vessel. The round exploded but the shield held. A second later another round struck the shield. Shimmering orange yet again, trying to withstand the force before it, until it shattered in a dazzling display of light and the depleted uranium spike penetrated the armor spearing itself inside, killing the crew and destroying everything inside. "Yeah take that you bastards!"

"Enemy armor on the right!" Before he could move the tank, he was jolted to the sides as another pair of gauss rounds struck the tank, then another. Again his HUD displayed another message, this time it sent a shudder down Mike's spine. 'Warning: Track Pods 2 and 4 have been disabled. Contact for VTOL salvage. Warning: auto-loading system offline.' Before he could think of what to do, his comm. clicked, the voice belonged to his commander.

"Alright everyone displace! Try to get back inside the city! Enemy air support is inbound!" Everyone shuddered at the new intel. In every war since the invention of armored units, enemy air support, had, and is the bane of nearly all armored units, air support often carried enough ordinances to take out entire columns, and too nimble to be struck by tank fire. Their only options in lack of friendly air cover or any sort of anti-air weapons left one option: retreat. Any other action often resulted in death.

"Stevens, we got to get out of here!" He tapped the button to open the hatch, getting only a whirring and smell of smoke as his answers. "Damn it!" This time he slammed the studs to trigger the four small explosive bolts. He braced him for them to blow, but the hatch remained secure: the bolts had failed to fire. "Hey Stevens get me out of here." Getting only silence in return, he called out again. "Stevens!" Wondering why his gunner wasn't answering him or helping, he glanced out through the small windshield between the hatch and the rest of tank. He didn't see much, but he got his answer: Steven's body was slumped over the hatch, least what was left of him. The first of the volley had taken out the auto-loader for the main gun, and Stevens. Somehow only tearing him apart from the waist up, and tossing him onto the hatch. The last shots had taken out the tread pods, effectively crippling the tank. He went to click his comm. Only to stop short as one of crested aliens came into view, climbing onto the tank, and in one swift move, it ripped off the top of the hatch. Before Mike could bring up his side arm, a fist slammed into him, and darkness swallowed him.

****APUFMKII****

Back within Second Eden, Williams was still in the command center, trying to manage the entire scenario as best as he could. Scattered around him, on the main holoprojector and on portable projectors, the constant influx of reports were strolling down as fast as he could read them. Some listing the statuses of cities and settlements, being listed as enemy captured, held, allied, besieged, destroyed and in a few rare cases, unknown. The reports were coming in from those at the settlements, whether they be local CDF or LEOs, or even civilians who had formed their own ragtag militias, were reporting back as best as they could. Each report further filling in the gaps about this new enemy.

Even with the report the sergeant from before, there will still many details that were left unanswered until the reports came in. And so far, the image that was being shaped was both disturbing, and

comforting, if such a thing were possible.

For starters, there were not one, but two different alien species, both of them radically different from the other. One species seemed almost avian, with a large torso and comparatively spindly limbs, much like a bird. Fighting them was like fighting the Elites, or another human army. They used tactics, and strategy, actually fighting as cohesive units for the most part. Someone had coined the nickname, Hunters, for both their marksmanship and the irregularly high number of snipers, or least what felt like snipers, they had. And the other species was more saurian, with large humps and a massive crest on their heads. Unlike their apparent allies, as the two races had been seen fighting alongside each other on multiple fronts, they were completely undisciplined. Charging headlong into battle, with little concern for incoming fire or taking cover. Taking literally dozens of rounds as they crashed into defensive lines before finally being put down. Usually by someone shoving their gun into the alien's gut and emptying the entire clip, if the reports were to be believed. They were being called shellheads since the plates on their heads seemed actually served as a sort of armor almost.

Then of course, there was that fact that every single one of them had energy shields. Literally Every, Single, One. Something that neither the UNSC or the New Covenant were capable of. Only their best would ever have the safety of an energy shield on top of their regular armor. And these aliens were apparently capable of giving all of their troops a personal generator. The only saving grace being that these shields were nowhere near as powerful as those used by the New Covenant, taking only half the number of shots on average before they either popped or their user ducked behind cover. There were a few cases where some took an entire clip and a half and still held, but they were far and few inbetween.

Their weapons and technology were also quite interesting. That device the sergeant had brought in had been a portable data tool that apparently mounted itself on the wrist. They couldn't make heads or tails of the language the device used, by the fact that this seemed to be commonplace technology was telling. The same for their weapons. No energy weapons, and not standard projectile weapons either. Instead they were miniaturized mass accelerators. How in the galaxy they managed to do that and then on a mass scale was beyond him, and as frightening as the thought of commonplace energy shields. Making matters worse was how they never seemed to run out of ammo. In more than several reports, the aliens had taken several locations simply because they had won a war of attrition. Where the defenders had been forced to fall back due to a lack of ammo.

All in all, the colony wasn't doing to well. They had lost contact with several bunkers, the last reports being that the aliens were right outside the blast doors. More and more of the settlements were being taken or wiped out, and more of his forces were being taken out as well. Second Eden was quickly becoming the last settlement still under human control. Williams hoped that the UNSC would get here soon, or Shanxi might just not be a human colony for much longer.

Note: Several author's note at the bottom for those of you who read those. And sorry this is so late! L But it took me so long to write this, and this is perhaps the 8th version I made of this chapter. Sorry!

Warning: lots of story before action scenes. Please review and let me know what you think!

A/N: And for those who haven't realized it yet, Shellheads are the Krogon while the Hunters are the Turians.

Shanix Era: New Enemies, New weapons, "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

Day Four after First Contact

Shanix: Second Eden: Renewed Hope Hospital: Emergency Aid stations

Doctors, medics, nurses and anyone else who possessed any form of medical training beyond basic first aid was running to and fro between patients, treating the wounded and the dying. A good number were civilians who had been injured during the evacuation of the other cities and settlements to Second Eden, injuries that occurred during the scramble and chaos resulting in accidental injuries. Others who had taken up to volunteer in defense as their friends and families evacuated. But more than a fair few had suffered from wounds inflicted by the unknown aliens' weapons. Their muscles and organs torn as the metal pellets from their weapons deformed and flattened as they impacted the body, acting like the hollow-point ammunition of the late 20th and early 21st century. Instead of traveling straight through, a flattened piece of metal remained with the victims until they could be pulled out. But as some quickly learned, even then, the enemy could kill. Some of the metals used were radioactive, while for many had been successfully treated in terms of surgery and radiation treatment; still for many it was too late. While others were treated to flash frozen limbs, third degree burns, shredded muscles and electrocution type injuries.

Wounds reflected among the military personnel, many to a far greater degree. First, Second and Third Degree burns over great percentages of their bodies, limbs amputated due to frostbite damage, being treated to radiation poisoning; the military uniforms possessed basic radiation treatment kits after the Incident in the Epsilon Eridani System.* Others also suffered massive blunt force trauma, knife wounds, missing limbs, from concussive forces, and, strangely: damage from high G-forces. What was most frightening all to the medical personnel among who had attempted to treat the wounds was disintegration. Some sort of energy was literally taking apart soldiers at the molecular level. Doctors were unsure of what to do, so depending on the patient, pump them full of medicinal steroids and/or sedatives to keep their bodies alive through the trauma. Thankfully to the relief of all, the energy dissipated on its own after a time from which the injured were brought in.

As grievous as the number of wounded and variety of wounds there were, those who knew better were grateful; realizing the damages could have been much worse. Other settlements had been razed to the ground either by their own residents or by the invading species. The crested aliens, which several of the military personnel who had seen

them first hand and were nicknamed "Shellheads" were seen as the most responsible for the wanton destruction. While the other species, those with a more avian appearance had been nicknamed "Hunters" due to how much marksmen skill the aliens demonstrated. Executing headshots and long range sniper kills with their strange weapons. Many a trooper had lost their lives to their skills. And many more would again today.

Second Eden: Makeshift Military Motorpool

The sounds of saws, plasma torches, arc welders and pneumatic tools filled the motor pool. Engineers, vehicles, weapons and spare parts were scattered everywhere. To most it was sheer chaos, to the men and women of the engineer corp. of the UNSC, it was organized chaos. The motor pool was separated by types and weight: the unused lightweight ATVs nicknamed "Mongooses", the LRV "Warthog" and in several of its multiple variants, and the few M809 MBT "Scorpion" tanks. The Warthogs had repaired relatively quickly and most were just in the state of being prepped, fueled and loaded for use. What was the greatest issue for the engineers of the motorpool were the Scorpion MBTs.

They had come from the cruiser The Right of Way and were not part of the standard contingent on the planet. As such, they did not possess many of the critical parts needed for operation. While the MBTs were incredibly robust, able to take obscene amounts of damage and yet still be able to fight, several components, once destroyed, made it impossible to operate until the component was replaced.

Of all the tanks deployed from the cruiser, a dozen sat in this particular motorpool, others had been lost outside the city, were operating or were parked at other makeshift motorpools. Of the twelve, all had been damaged, two were repaired, another three undergoing, and the remainder being stripped of parts to repair the few they can. Seven tanks had lost several critical components such as the auto-loader, the neural net interface, targeting mechanism, gyroscopic stabilizer in several of the track pods. Realizing that it would be a futile effort to attempt to repair all seven, they dedicated their efforts to repairing another three of the seven and stripping the other four for salvage and parts.

If only they knew what awaited them outside the city walls.

****Second Eden: Military Command****

Lieutenant Major Felipe Silvera sighed. The general had yet to have left his office, leaving it to him and the other officers to maintain command. The problem was Shanix was quickly becoming the only settlement on the planet under Human control. These aliens had moved fast; advancing faster than they had ever expected, not just by air, but by land as well. Their armored vehicles moved with the speed of a M12 FAV LRV, but possessed the firepower of a Scorpion tank. Their infantry, from few reports were gathered from fleeing refugees and the small number of militia and other troopers, they learned of the two different species, and learned, though they were apparently allies, could not be any more different.

The avian of the species, which the troopers had labeled 'Hunters' were trained, fighting in small units, displaying obvious tactical skills; the main reason why they pulled back so many, police and

militia can't stand against such a force.

And then there were the Shellheads, if the reports were anything to go by, were essentially their shock troopers. Charging in with reckless abandon, crushing anything and everything in their path, reports said of civilians ramming several of them with their vehicles, killing several by the majority getting by unscathed, or at least not care about it. Along with being the majority of their heavy weapons units, some of the weapons they carried would have given even a Sangheili a hard time wielding.

"Damn it, we're not prepared for something like this." Shanix was more or less an agricultural and R&R type of colony. Not beaches or anything of the sort but somewhere people could simply forget about their worries and just live. If it were not for the _Right of Way_'s compliment of troops, armor and supplies, they might have not lasted as long as they did already. The Major sighed as he picked up a data tablet detailing the latest reports. The commanding officer of the Longsword and Claymore fighters, another gift from the fallen cruiser, reported several of his patrols had taken down several of the enemy aircraft, both dropships and fighters. Their recon reports matching those made by groundside in regards to troop movement and deployment. No casualties by the grace of whatever deity reigned above. But the CO reported that they would no longer be conducting recon or patrol flights. Their fuel supplies were limited as UNSC fighters used a much higher grade fuel for their engines than the civilian market.

This was quickly becoming a siege, a style of warfare they were woefully unprepared. Yes the city design itself made it a defensible position, forcing the enemy into a ground war and a bottleneck. And yes they were protected from the skies but they could not hold out for long. What supplies they possessed was it. Food, medical supplies, fuel, munitions. By their current count and the rate of consumption, they would be over whelmed in a matter of days, at most a week, perhaps more, a significant decrease due to the number of refugees who fled to Second Eden upon the General's command. "We need to get these people out of here. We-"

"Sir!" The lieutenant turned to face the communications officers who had called out, it's the Viery bridge checkpoint sir! They're under attack!"

"Damn it, someone get the General back here now, I want him here yesterday." Several of his peers balked at the way Silvera referred to the General but he didn't give a damn.' It should be him up here instead of me!' "What's the report?"

"Sir, reports of enemy armor coming over the Viery Bridge! Hard formation: heavy infantry in front, smaller units in the back! They've got some sort of personal shield generators! And they're just pushing the wrecks in front either off the bridge or forward to the checkpoint!"

"Damn it! Someone get the General up here now! I'm heading down there!"

****Viery Bridge: Checkpoint****

The air was thick with the smell of sulfur and discharged rounds. The

clattering of spent brass casings could barely be heard over the gunfire and the yells of the Human defenders as they called to each other. Men and women as they called out to each other, for ammo, and assistance, the screams of the dying filled the air.

Bodies, both Human and alien, littered the area separating the Human defenders from the Alien attackers, creating a virtual No-Man's-Land. The alien force had pushed forward hard in the past several hours. Using one of their APCs, due to how despite all their armor and firepower, could move as fast as an M21 LRV, and carry as many as over a half a dozen troops inside, to push the wreck of another of their APCs forward, using it as a shield against the defender's fire. The Human defenders had set up barricades using vehicles, sandbags, depressed roadblocks and even a garbage truck.

And the defenders were being pushed back. Shellheads wrapped in a blue aura somehow charged forward in a flash of blue light; slamming into the defender's ranks, bypassing barricades to get at their enemies, taking multiple magazine and several defenders before they fell.

A yell could be heard above the din of gunfire and explosions, "Someone get a railgun up here!" One of the cars in barricade detonated as if to punctuate his statement, men and bodies flying through the air. The sounds of weapons barely dinned, even as several of wounded began to cry out for a medic. "I mean now damn it!"

A militiaman fired his MA5-C on full auto to the left of the wreck, even as he called out to one of the heavy gunners. "Watch the left! The left!" He turned to face one of the marines on a M41 Light Anti-Aircraft Gun (LAAG), "I said on the left f-urk!" He fell, a sniper round in the back of his skull.

"Sonuva-" The gunner swiveled the turret, firing as he went, "Eat this fuckers!" The 12.7x99mm ammunition tearing apart the aliens unlucky enough to be caught out in the open as they attempted to shift cover. "Yeah, from me to you ugly!" Raising his fist in the air in excitement, right before his face was slammed into the gun itself by a Shellhead, crushing his skull and killing him. The alien turned, again wrapped in a blue aura, as another marine opened fire at point-blank range with his M95 Close-Assault Weapon shotgun. The pellets splattered against the aura, falling apart at the molecular level before they impacted. The alien responded with a blast from its massive hand cannon, easily twice the size of the Human's palm, the slug slamming into his body before flying out the outer side. It turned as other fired upon it, a blue barrier around it shimmering with each bullet. Holstering the hand cannon, began gathering a blue aura around itself, and in one shift motion, the Shellhead flew forward, faster than any of them could see, crushing a SWAT officer into a concrete barricade. It redrew its pistol and shot several of the defenders as they tried to bring it down, killing a total of twelve defenders. It trained on a militia defender before a SWAT officer ran full pelt into the Shellhead, at the same time driving her knee into its crotch, knocking it off balance before she jammed her own M95 Close Assault weapon right below its maw, slipping past the barrier, and pulled the trigger. With a deafening blast, the air was filled with bits of blood and gore. The body fell with a great thud. Another four defenders were struck down by alien sniper, a trail of smoke leaving their helmets where the bullets punched through.

"Damn it where is that counter-sniper!" 1st lieutenant Dillian Killian was both pissed off and about to piss his pants at the same time. He was a Marine, he wasn't green. Having gotten his rank the old fashioned way rather than an academy, he had been part of the Heretic Wars, when the UNSC had sided with the now reigning faction on Sangheili. He had taken part in the various war games between the UNSC and its Sangheili counterpart: the Spear of Sangheili. He was no stranger to war, to death and battle. Still fear gripped his heart. Never before had he been in a first contact scenario. And never before had he had to conduct a battle where he was leading, not just fellow marines, but police, planetary militia, and army forces. He ducked behind cover to reload his M395 Designated Marksman Rifle(DMR) when he saw several of the militia and police defenders begin to run. "Do not abandon your posts!" Tapping his helmet, he shifted the frequency to a general array, linking him to every radio within range. "Listen up! We got a choice here people! Either: you stay and fight or you turn tail and hide!" In the corner of his eye he saw a few people get ready to run. "But remember this, you run, that's one less person to keep these miserable alien bastards outside the city! Fuck!" A sniper round planted itself not inches from his foot, barely missing his head. "You run and that's ten more bastards that get into the city for each one of you." He slammed the magazine home, slapping down the receiver, "You run, and everyone inside are all as good as dead. "So," He rose, shouldering his DMR and pulled the trigger four times, each of them hitting their mark, his aim firm even as the bullets flew past him, each 7.62 by 51 mm NATO round planting itself inside the brain of a charging Shellhead, "Stand your ground!"

The defenders, emboldened by the lieutenant's voice, cheered and fought back with renewed vigor. Showing a tenacity and spirit not seen before by the attackers or the defenders. Soldiers found their spirits yet again. Officers found their reason again: To protect and Serve the People. Militia remembered their families, their friends. Bullets found their marks, call signs called out and orders relayed. The enemy advance fell dead in their tracks. Marines and Soldiers remembered the call of duty and honor.

"Come on then!" A young police officer cried out. His sidearm depleted of ammunition, he grabbed a rifle from a fallen Hunter that had managed to make its way to the barricade. Leaping over, he fired as he ran forward, sliding behind a blown car for cover. "Let's go!" He cried, waving to the others. Before jumping up and letting loose a long burst from his captured rifle, making the blue barriers of one of the shellheads shimmer then shattered. Blood coming out of its wounds before it took cover behind a destroyed truck. It let out a fierce roar, rallying its own allies who began to, again, force their way up. Even with their renewed strength the defenders were weakening as their numbers dwindled. Shellheads fired great red blobs of energy from their weapons, detonating at impact and scorching the area. Some used their weapons like cudgels, literally throwing men into the air through sheer force and impact, dead before their bodies hit the ground. Blue spheres of energy throwing and pulling men into the air, others were creating a gravity well picking up debris, bodies and men, before detonating violently.

'Damn it.' Killian thought. 'We can't hold here for much longer. We're starting to seriously lose men.' The bolt on his weapon clacked empty; ejecting the spent magazine he reached for a fresh one, only

to grab empty space. 'Oh no.' He looked to see others in a similar situation, stripping other weapons and ammo off the fallen. While others picked up the alien weapons and began to open fire. Doing the same he grabbed one of the fallen aliens' hand cannons before he clicked his comm. "Everyone fall back! Fall back!" He brought up the pistol and fired off a round, the recoil barely jarred him. 'This thing barely has any kick.' A round passed by his ear, bringing him back to the fight. "Damn it I said fall back!"

"Belay that order, stand your ground." Another voice called out.

"Who is this?"

"This is Major Silvera, get everyone to keep their heads down and eyes peeled, we're coming to you."

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Killian here sir. With all due respect, we need to get out of here."

"Trooper, I only have one thing to say: get down now!"

Instinct built from years of experience forced his body down flat on the ground. Right before he heard the iconic electrical whirring followed by the boom of a M68 Asynchronous Linear-Induction Motor, or Gauss cannon. When he looked up, it was obvious the 25mm ferromagnetic round had found its mark. A Shellhead had literally been ripped in two, torn apart at its midsection, what remained upwards of the torso was flopped down not five meters from the barricade, while everything else beneath had been vaporized in a shower of gore. When he looked back, he saw not just one, but several 'Hogs, from the standard model carrying the M12 LAAG, to the Troop Transport variant.

Regular troops disembarked from the vehicles, sans the gunners, and joined the other defenders in pushing the aliens back. Sharp cracks soon join the sounds of battle as sniper teams began to find their marks and take them down. The aliens began to fall back, their numbers beginning cut down.

The battle here was won for now. But not all battles are fought with bullets and soldiers.

****Tero City: City Courthouse****

What had once been a house of Justice and Rights had been transformed into a makeshift internment camp. Inside, people huddled around fires, doctors and nurses tended to the sick and wounded in makeshift sick bays. Families, friends, and couples all trying to comfort each other in the best way they can.

The aliens had corralled all remaining human survivors into several buildings, turning them into makeshift camps. So far, the only ones keeping guard had been the ones, as word had spread from a captured Scorpion Tank driver as he had been treated for a concussion and cracked skull, Hunters, at least in regards to the courthouse guards. Though no one could understand them there was an obvious tension between the majorities of the two different species. The majority of the prisoners had been captured by Hunters, or had been saved by them from Shellheads. There had also been more than one incident where a

Shellhead had taken out some of the brawnier Humans and had engaged in a fist fight with them. Breaking bones and bruising muscle. It had ended with the arrival of a Hunter wearing more sophisticated armor and a strange patch on his shoulder. It had gotten into, near as those who were close enough to see and hear, a shouting match with an equally sophisticated armor wearing Shellhead. After which none of the Human prisoners had seen a Shellhead get closer than 20 meters of the Courthouse. They had tried of course, but the Hunters kept them away; using their rifles and bodies to push them away from the prisoners. The Hunters were more or less, amiable to the prisoners. Bringing them whatever supplies they found. Most of it food, water, clothing and most surprisingly, medical supplies, the Hunters seemed to recognize to a degree what was what, but still neither could understand the other. Few of the Hunters, and even one of the Shellheads, tried to be more, for lack of a better term, friendly with the Humans. Displaying their strange powers, creating blue spheres of pulsing energy, crouching down to reduce their intimidating aura, one even tried to give some of their food, but was halted by one of his fellows.

This behavior confused the Human prisoners. Were these aliens not invading their world? Were not some of their fellows slaughtering their friends and family as they ran? It was confusing for many of them. Not hours before their lives had been destroyed by First Contact with a new species, and now here they were, being contained and treated by them. Being protected by one species from the other.

Groups had been made, clustered around holo-screens, fire pits, and desk lamps. Each group deep within their own discussions: among which, were the first to see the newcomers.

"How's he doing?" Cris asked. His glasses were missing from his face, instead replaced by a black eye and split lip.

"He'll be fine." Katy said, her face and hair dirtied, and her hands covered in purple blood. "We managed to set all his bones and sew any wounds. How's Hood?"

"I'm fine." 'Hood' was leaning against a wall, his left arm in a sling. "Squid, you going to be ok?"

A groan came from the wounded Sangheilli, he had attempted to engage one of the Shellheads in hand-to-hand combat, despite being out of armor, when they had encountered one on the way to the spaceport. Needless to say, it hadn't turned out well.

"He will be fine. As long as he stops whining like a wounded cat'ila." Serana answered. "Come on, you are supposed to be a Sangheilli, not a whimpering Unggoy."

"Leave him be, we need to figure out what we're going to do next. Any ideas?"

"The way I see it, we got a few options: One: we wait. Or Two: We try and contact Second Eden." Mich said.

"Why not just break out of here?" Maho asked.

"Because not many of us are feeling suicidal today." Alexei answered.

"Especially not after some of us have learned a new meaning to 'First Contact'." Alexei had been one of the last to have been forced to fight one of the Shellheads hand-to-hand. Thankfully for him, one of the Hunters had stopped it before it went too far. As it was, he was severally bruised and more than likely had a few cracked ribs.

"Can we contact SE?"

"Not unless someone has a working radio or something." Cris answered. "They took all of our gear. Just left us with the clothes on our back."

"Then all we can do is wait." Hood though, was less concerned about themselves, and more about their new 'wardens'. This wasn't looking like a total conquest or expansion. Their military force was too small. Usually an invading army would be large enough to subjugate whoever they attacked and then occupy the area without reinforcements. This was anything but. That was what worried Hood, either they could have gotten lucky and this was a rogue group acting on its own, or if they were unlucky, this was just the scouting party. And only time would tell which it was.

Author's note: Yeah, I know I keep misspelling Shanxi but for this story it's going to stay Shanix because I'm too lazy to correct it. I'll put up a poll later and if enough people really want the change, then I'll make the edit at a later date. Also, this is probably the 8th version of this chapter that I have created, and I still consider this to be crapâ€|

A/N: Also, will be posting on my deviantaccount at a later date, a rough sketchn of how the general city structure of Second Eden looks. Link will be posted in a new story, purely for codex entries for this story. First entry: The Heretic Wars.

Also, more than likely, there will only be one more chapter on Shanix with a major time jump. If you guys would rather I just make this the last chapter, let me know in the reviews. If enough people say so, then I will just give a condensed version of Shanix end later on as a codex entry. Have gotten started on basic plot how things will go Post-Shanix. So once this segment is done, things should be a lot faster. Also, anyone who thinks I'm hating on the Turians and Krogan too much or making their species seem a bit out of character, please wait until later in the story. I'll explain then.

6. Shanxi: Hell

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mark II

Edited. Version 2.1

A/N: someone please check my math here later in the chapter. I did this edit as I was traveling on the road soâ€|Yeah.

Posted:8/16/2013

Ch. 6 Shanix: Finale

"As it ends, so it begins."

7 Days since First Contact

"Do it! Finish it!" Killian roared at the Shellhead, defiant until the end. The corners of the Shellhead's mouth turned up into a smirk. Rumbling something in its Native tongue, it raised its massive shotgun and pointed towards the Lieutenant.

Just as the alien started to pull down on the trigger, a boom sounded, then another, and another. Soon the air was filled with the sounds of thunder. Looking up, streaks of fire rained across the sky and landed in the city. To the alien, it looked as though missiles were falling from the skies, to the marine, it was obvious what they were as he and every other human soldier who saw or heard them come through the skies knew what they were: reinforcements.

Thousands of Single Occupant Entry/Insertion Vehicle Drop-pods rained across the war torn city of Second Eden; some crashing into buildings, others into streets and some directly into a firefight. But every single Human being who heard the sonic boom of the pods, or saw the streaks of fire came down let out a cheer that shook the planet: The ODSs were here, and it was payback time.

****The Skies above Second Eden****

A flight of GA-TL1 Longsword Fighters peeled off from the other fighters escorting dropships down to the city.

"All call signs report in. Raptor Lead reporting in."

"Raptor 2-1 standing by."

"Raptor 2-2, on station."

"Raptor 2-3, on station and ready to bring the pain!"

"Raptor 2-4 here, and ready to muzzle 2-3's big mouth. Ma'am."

Captain Genesis Amari, commander of Raptor Flight, an all-female ace squadron, chuckled to herself. "Alright girls, we got a job to do here. These alien bastards seem to think the air above Shanxi belong to them. These sons of bitches have hit this colony and to them I say this: Let's show them why they call Raptor Flight "The Valkyries of the UNSC!" Each Longsword pilot slammed the accelerator on their fighters, bringing their speeds to well past Mach 6, their weapons primed and ready. Both machine and man desired blood, and together they flashed forward in search of war.

****High Orbit above Second Eden****

On board a UNSC Heavy Cruiser, Say My Name, only one thing was on the minds of the crew: rage: Pure and utter rage. They had seen the enemy take down the light-cruiser Peace of Mind, concentrating their fire on the starboard side. A lucky one in a thousand shot striking an armed Archer Missile pod just as the missiles were about to fire. It set off a chain reaction that ripped through the ship despite the honey-combed structure, reaching more ammunition storage areas before finally reaching the reactor and destroying it from all sides. And he be would be damned before he would let another one fall

to the alien upstarts. The heavy frigate and destroyer pair, Terra's Shield and Terra's Sword tumbled in space for a few moments as the detonation, brief as it was, splashed over the pair's shields and shook the hull.

Several of the invaders ships began moving in on the pair, seeing the moment of weakness and seizing advantage of the stricken vessels. "Target their frigates; I want 50 missiles for every single damn frigate we can get at! Get our autocannons targeting their corvettes; I want those damn things gone like the damn Heretics!" Captain Cid Eldred ordered. "Someone get me a firing solution on one of their cruisers; get Harrrdrn on the horn, I want a clear line of sight between my cruiser and those bastards!"

"Aye aye!" Raging Horse, the Say My Name's ship AI, taking on the image of an Apache war chief, donned in full traditional Apache war dress. "These intruders have spilled the blood of our kin, now it is our time to spill theirs." The Apache Native styled AI thumped his chest once before his avatar faded from the display.

'Damn, this is turning into one big cluster fuck.' The captain thought as he watched the battle from his bridge. The space above Shanxi was pure hell: autocannon fire and flying missiles traded positions with the aliens' own missiles and mass accelerator rounds. Because of the close quarters forced upon them by the alien cruisers closing the distance before they could be destroyed by MAC rounds, the UNSC ships were forced to rely solely on their point-defense systems and secondary armaments. It was a style of space-based combat no one in the UNSC Navy was prepared for. For the majority of all major space battles since the beginning of the Great War, had been at great distances where both sides could rely on their primary, bow mounted armaments. As opposed to just broadsiding the enemy like the ocean-based galleons of old earth.

With the loss of one of their cruisers already it was a blow to the morale of some of the crew. The majority of them were only recent academy graduates. Very few, like the captain, who had been an ensign himself, were veterans. He himself had served aboard a Charon-class frigate, the Hail the Dawn during the Human-Covenant war, facing against overwhelming odds and to see one of their mightiest ships be taken down so quickly after the beginning of an engagement was nothing unusual among the veterans. For the young, inexperienced and new crewmen and women, it was a shocking and near-unfathomable idea. Growing up during a time when humanity was seen as nigh invincible, death and loss had never even touched their minds. Noticing this, the captain sighed before drawing in a breath, his chest puffing up as he did so. "Wake up you maggots!" The bridge crew jumped in their stations and their captain's voice. "You think this is bad, you ain't seen anything yet! They have brought down one of ships, taken how many lives were on her, and now it's time to do the same a hundredfold!" There was no roar from the crew, there was no cheer, but one wasn't needed. "You are the best of humanity! We are the UNSC Navy! And now is the time to show these aliens why humanity is a galactic superpower!" As though the guns answered for them all. The dual H-Class MACs fired noiselessly in space, the technology battle-tested on retrofitted Halcyon(Grade-I) cruiser, the Pillar of Autumn engaged. Magnetic energy capture fields regaining the energy that would have been lost in the firing of the first barrage being recaptured and fed back into the MAC. There was a slight tremor on the bridge as a triple barrage of MACs rounds traveled at a fraction

of the speed of light, streaking towards their target. Spearing through the front of the targeted enemy cruiser-analogue upon impact, travelling down it's length, before gouging a massive exist out the back and passing clean through, the alien cruiser-analogue shattering from the impact. The rounds themselves impacting against the Era of Retaliation after gouging their way through, creating the barest of shudder in her shields.*

At the same time The Say My Name's autocannons opened fire, on both her broadsides, spooling up the rotating barrels to allow the highest possible rate of fire. An enemy frigate-weight/class ship was the first unlucky target. The ship's nacelles flaring white-blue as it attempted to get out of the cannons' line of fire. An effort too little, too late; 88mm shells blasted the shields apart under an endless salvo. When they fractured, the guns only fired even faster. The rounds ripping through the enemy's hull, shredding everything to pieces. At the end, all that was left was floating shards. The ship been so thoroughly annihilated, the reactor had not even overloaded. All of the cruiser's escaped, by the luck of not being inside the autocannons' cone of fire.

On the bridge, Raging Horse reappeared on the dais, the AI gestured the captain over to the tactical display. "I've got something." His hologram moved as if to tap the display, changing to show a cleared picture of the position of all the ships. "When we took out that cruiser, the cruiser was targeting one of our frigates." A line of sight was projected from the alien vessel, lining up with the heavy-frigate, which had presented its stern towards it.

"What are you saying?"

"I am suggesting rather than try and take the enemy head on, we focus on protecting our own ships." With that, more lines of sight appears on the screen, from both UNSC and the alien ships. "Projections show that this will be a far more effective strategy as it will allow us to preserve other vessels and at the same time, allow us to use our full instead of only our secondary armaments."

The captain had to agree with the AI's assessment. The enemy cruiser-weigh/class vessel they had destroyed had been targeting one of their frigates, specifically the bridge area. Whether by luck or design it hadn't mattered. Had the MAC round fired only so much later, the frigate, The Guardian, would have been crippled by losing its bridge.

"Alert the Admiral. Send this tactical data to all the ships. Let's finish off the rest of these bastards."

****SOEIV Drop Pod: Alpha L9-2A****

Special Operations Trooper Callsign Phoenix watched as the majority of the other drop pods descended below him towards Second Eden. Watching them for a few moments, he began punching in new coordinates and shifted his drop pods towards Tero City. Engaging the smoke projectors and opening up the secondary fuel lines, further igniting the outside of the pod. A moment later deploying flares. In the chaos of the battle in orbit and arrival of the ODSs no one on the ground paid any real attention to the single pod that seemingly malfunctioned and began moving away from the rest.

Phoenix though knew his role. Having been briefed by the head of the Office of Naval Intelligence Section III herself: Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky.

****Earth: London: ONI Sec. III Headquarters: Office of Parangosky****

"You called for me ma'am?" Despite his cool demeanor, inside he was terrified. Few every had direct contact with the Head of Section III and lived to tell about it. Despite this being his third time inside the admiral's office, a record among the non-Admiralty, it was no less nerve wracking.

"Ah yes, callsign Phoenix. You are the man correct?"

It may have come like a question but the Special Operations Agent knew better. It was more or less a test, as common rumor went that only one man had ever crossed the Admiral and lived.

"Yes ma'am."

Satisfied she nodded, "As I'm sure rumors have spread around, First Contact has been made yet again on Shanxi."

The trooper's eyes widen. 'First Contact! Again!' He had been too fight in the Human-Covenant War or the immediately thereafter, Heretic Wars. But had seen action in all the conflict Humanity had found itself in thereafter. And his skills had attracted the attention of ONI Section II. And later Section III.

"We have an, asset of considerable value at Shanxi. And is currently behind enemy lines of these, 'invaders'. This asset cannot be allowed to fall into enemy hands. It is doubtful that they would ever realize the value of what they now possess but still, we cannot take that risk. Your mission is twofold: ensure extraction of the asset from the planet by any means possible and target any potential enemy HVTs(High Value Targets.) Your ship leaves in a few hours. Dismissed."

**** SOEIV Drop Pod: Alpha L9-2A****

"Landfall in 10 seconds."

Phoenix was shaken from the memory and braced his body for the landing. Despite all the advances made to drop pod, it was a still a jarring and potentially lethal experience. Even so long after the Wars, the ODSI Division was still an all-volunteer outfit.

"Engage secondary thrusters, 30 degree turn. On my mark. Mark." The drop pod shook hard as the secondary set of thrusters on his modified drop pod engaged. Turn it away from the front lines and towards the outskirts of Tero City.

****APUFMKII****

****SOEIV #1445262****

ODSI Trooper Heller, Maks. Private: First Class. Jester Squad

Current Location: 30,000 meters above Second Eden and dropping

Private Maks held on to the handles of his Single Occupant Exo-atmospheric Insertion Vehicle. Listening to the pod shake it and thousands of others like his, were dropped from low orbit, now heading towards the planet at, or rapidly approaching, terminal velocity: the maximum speed a falling object will every attain by gravity alone while falling. He heard a faint click as his helmet radio engaged. The voice coming over belonging to the Colonel.

"Listen up Marines! We are currently dropping into the nice and pleasant city of Second Eden. This is not a just another combat drop people! We are dropping right onto of enemy positions into the heart of a civilian locale. Our primary objective is to defend the civilians. You find any, get them to a safe zone ASAP! Secondary objectives are to take out any and all unknowns! We are not to allow anything that isn't human or at the very least familiar stay inside this damn city! SOP for any surrendering unknowns. Good luck." The comm. didn't shut off as the colonel finished. One of the other ODSs hacked the comm. network and soon, music began blaring through the network. Maks recognized it as something from the 21st century.

Soon enough though, the music cut out as the clouds began to appear before they breached the cloud layer. The colonel's voice came over the comm. again. "All pods, prepare for course correction on my mark." He held the control yokes in his hand. "Mark." Pressing the button, Maks felt his pod jolt as it directed itself closer to the city.

He grimaced as he saw a pod catch fire before hurtling out of control. The person inside never even screamed. Wherever it landed, it was going to be outside the city. Whoever was inside would be dead before they landed. It was a better fate then your pod losing control in freefall and digging your own grave. Trapped inside a small pod-turned-coffin. With a choice of either just waiting until lack of oxygen or hunger killed you, or you saved yourself the wait. Small mercies.

He pushed the thought into the back of his mind as the automated systems engaged. "Engaging Drag-chute." His pod shuddered violently as the chute deployed on his and the other pods to slow them down before making landfall. Gripping the yokes tight, he prepped himself to hit the ground. And show the aliens why to be ODS meant to be an elite.

****Raptor Flight: Raptor Lead****

"The fuckers banking left! Don't let him!"

"Like hell I'm going to let the bastard get away!" Raptor 2-2 shouted back. Lieutenant Clarice Ternen gritted her teeth. "Get back her you little twerp." She yanked her control stick left and right as she tried to keep the enemy fighter in her sights. The crosshairs in her helmet drawing upon the enemy fighter, shifting between red and green as they passed over and off the target. This time, as they passed over the target, they stayed red: a target lock. "Got him! Raptor 2-2 firing!" Her thumb depressed the button on top of the control stick, launching an ASGM-10 missile towards the target. At the same time,

she pressed on the trigger on the stick, launching a burst of 110-mm shells from the fighter's rotary autocannon. Half of the burst found their mark, slamming into the fighter's shield, which, despite the salvo, still held. Its pilot let out a sigh of relief just before his fighter's console flared a warning: enemy ordinance locked on. His mind only had time to register the message before being consumed in a great flame as the missile found its mark.

"Hell yeah! That makes eight today!"

"Nice job Raptor 2-2, not bad." Flight control lieutenant called back. Taking a look at the general status of the fighter group ordered, "RTB Raptor flight. Time to refuel and rearm. Looks like you might be the last ones to go out. Enemy fighter squadrons are dropping out of the skies."

"What? Seriously?" Raptor lead was surprised, as were the rest of her squadron. They had realized they and the other fighters, ranging from other Longswords and several Saber squadrons, along with the new Broadwords were superior to the alien fighters but didn't realize they were **that** superior.

"Yeah, our fighters are really wiping the floor with them. And it doesn't help them that more than a few of their fighter groups tried to charge our frigates more than once."

"Alright then." Raptor lead responded. "You heard command girls, RTB to refuel and rearm. We-What the hell?" Her display started blaring warnings out to her, something about a, target lock! "Raptor flight: break formation, break now!" Almost as one, the five GA-TL1 Longsword-class Interceptors broke formation. Each heading off in individual directions, a moment later, flights of missiles passed by where each interceptor had been before turning to follow their respective fighters.

"Shit! Raptor flight, evade, evade, evade!"

Each interceptor began making maneuvers to try and throw off the missiles. All of them began firing off chaff and flares to throw off or force the missiles to detonate early. For some of them it worked. Setting off one missile and triggering a chain reaction. But for Raptor 2-3, whatever she tried, the missiles stubbornly tracked her interceptor.

"Help! I can't get this thing off me!"

"Roll! Roll!"

"I tried!"

"Head for one of the frigates! Get in range of their CIWS, use them to take down the missiles!"

"Copy that!" Raptor 2-3 turned her interceptor to the right, slamming on the throttle as she came out of the turn. The missile pack following her trail. "Oh god, oh god, oh god." Sweat dripped down her face as she desperately tried to outrun the missiles. Her onboard display blaring warnings as the missiles closed in. She tried to force more out her engines but they were already pushed to the max.

She cracked a small smile as a frigate, _The Shepard's Staff_, came into sight. "I'm going to make it, I think-" her radio cut off abruptly as the missiles made contact. Their sheer number overloading her shields and destroying her fighter in seconds.

"No!" Raptor 2-4 screamed. "2-3 do you read! 2-3!" She was answered with silence. Breaking protocol she cried, "God damn it if you're alive, Patricia, answer me!" Her radio crackled with static. Unseen by the others, but known by the rest of her squad mates, tears ran down the face of 2-4.

"Command, where did does that ordinance come from?" Raptor lead asked.

"One moment." Flight control answered. "Found it, it was from one of their frigates that came down in-atmo."

"Mark it on my HUD. Same for the rest of my squad. Tell the hangar crew to prep 'Rapier' for four. Raptor Lead out." Tears streaked down the face of the squadron leader's face but unlike 2-4, her face was contorted into a look of pure rage. "Bastards just took down one of my girls. None of them are getting the fuck off this planet now."

****Second Eden****

On the ground, all within in the city, turian, krogan and human alike, were transfixed by the sight of the pods streaking down from low orbit. The fact that the krogans and turians did not understand why their foes began cheering to the skies around them would be their undoing.

As the pods began landing around and outside the city, many of them landing behind enemy lines, very few crashed into any buildings.

On the ground, a turian soldier stared at the skies as the flames from reentry vanished and revealed the pods. "By the spirits, are they mad?!" His mandibles lay slack against his face, his jaw open at the sight and he was not the only one. His entire squad, a mix of standard troopers, with several sentinels and even an ex-Cabal who returned to active duty was staring at the skies. "What is wrong with these primitives?!"

His eyes widened as he realized several of those very pods was heading in his general direction. And one was, "Spirits! Everyone move! Get to cover! One of those things is coming down here!" He and the rest of his squad began rushing for whatever cover they could find, whether it be inside a nearby building or behind a vehicle.

The pod crashed down with a thunderous roar, sending tremors through the earth and through dust and debris into the air. Most of the squad remained fine, despite the dust thanks to their armor and helmets. "Sound off! Everyone alright." There was some coughing but the majority did call out their callsigns and reported themselves as being fine. "Weapons up, I want to take a closer look at that pod. Maybe get whatever poor volca out of there if it's still alive."

As they approached the pod, their astonishment increased as the dust

settled and the pod could be seen more easily. The front, if what was facing them was it, had a cross-shape of what looked to be tinted glass, which didn't make sense as that would and should have shattered from reentry forces.

Inside the pod, an ODS1 lay waiting. The trooper knew that while they may be able to see outside the pod and the aliens, the aliens would not be able to look it. Gripping the M6-C variant pistol tightly, a hand waited against the release mechanism. Once pulled, the pod door would be violently ejected. Giving the ODS1 inside both an easy exit from the pod and at the same time, giving them a few precious seconds to act as the enemy was recovering from the pod door's ejection.

"C'mon, c'mon. Just get a little close you ugly bastard." The hand gripped the lever tighter.

As for the turians, the commander approached but kept his distance. Signaling one of his sentinels, he ordered. "Get over there, try and open up the pod. We'll cover you." With that the sentinel nodded and stepped forward, his omnitool out and ready.

Shaking his head as he found no remote access. He stepped closer to try and find a port to link to the pod or if needed, open it manually. Not knowing it would be the last thing he did on this new world.

Inside, the ODS1 grinned. "Gotcha."

As the turian sentinel approached the pod door, the last thing he would ever see would be the door being explosively propelled from the pod before it splattered him against it, slamming into a small car before bouncing around the street.

Trying to recover from the shock, both from the sudden death of their comrade and the explosive ejection of the pod door, the turian squad was slow to react. A trio of 12.7mm by 40mm rounds slammed into the head of another turian, this one a soldier. The first two powerful semi-armor piercing high-explosive rounds slamming into the turian's shield, causing it to shimmer as it stopped the rounds. The last round shattered the shield and sliced off one of the turian's mandibles.

Recovering from their stupor, the Turians trained their weapons on the pod and opened fire, filling the inside with a flood of mass accelerator rounds.

But the ODS1 had already abandoned the pod and rolled to the left by the time the Turians had opened fire on the pod. Slotting the pistol in its holster, the ODS1 brought up the rifle they had ripped from the pod to bear. The MA6-Series A-Variant rifle rattled on full-auto as the twice-over accelerated rounds slammed, shattered and eviscerated the shields and the bodies of the aliens in front of them.

The Cabal however, brought up the strongest barriers it could muster as it dived towards the pod itself, the closest cover in the area. Skimming their barriers as it made it, the pod rattled from the barrage it was subjected too. Gathering the energy for singularity in its palm, it moved around the pod and threw it where they had last

seen the ODS'T.

Catching the ODS'T off guard, the trooper tossed themselves forward to avoid the mass of dark energy. Barely avoiding the high-gravity sphere, the trooper rolled and in one fluid motion, slid right into the face of the Turian Cabal.

Forgoing their guns, the two elite soldiers threw themselves at the other, one drawing a knife, the other focusing their biotics into their fists. They grappled, trying to get an advantage over the other and pin them to the ground. The Cabal lightened its own weight using their biotics. The sudden shift caused the ODS'T to lose their focus, allowing the Cabal to pin the ODS'T to the ground. Smirking in victory, the Cabal pulled back its arm, and slammed down a biotically charged fist on the polarized visor.

Only to be met with the shimmer of a shield as it intercepted the strike. Still the shield shattered but had reduced the blow by so much it only cracked the ODS'T's visor. Seizing the chance, the ODS'T brought up the knife and sliced the Cabal across the throat, arterial splatter coating the ODS'T's now cracked visor. The turian fell backwards, talons clutching at the wound uselessly trying to stem the blood flow.

Pulling itself up, the ODS'T flicked the blood off the knife before returning it to its sheath. Tracing a hand across the cracked visor, the trooper snarled audibly before removing the helmet and throwing it to the ground.

The dying Cabal, looking at the Elite Human warrior looked on wide eyed as the face of the human warrior was shown. It had expected a male to have been underneath that armor. A grizzled veteran with the scars to match.

The trooper tided up their hair, the knot having come undone during the drop. Looking down at the wide-eyed, dying alien warrior asked, "What? Never had a woman kick your ass before?" Tying off the knot, she removed the detachable earpiece from inside the helmet and placing it in her ear.

Back at Killian's position, the Krogan warrior who had the marine dead to rights looked away from the sky as the last of the falling objects disappeared from the sky. Turning back to his defeated foe, the Krogan smiled a wicked smile. It raised its massive shotgun once again towards Killian's face, who looked past the weapon and directly into the eyes of its holder.

As the massive finger squeezed the trigger, a massive crack sounded through the air. A second later, the gun was split in two, fragments flying into the air. The front of the weapon spinning through the air before landing on the ground.

Both soldiers and everyone else around them, alien and human alike, turned towards where the sound had come from. A single man stood in one the buildings, looking outside a ruined window. An ODS'T soldier, garbed in the blue striped uniform of a designated marksman, on one knee with an SRS99D-S2 AM sniper rifle aimed at the pair.

"Have no fear! The Helljumpers are here! "

Across the city ODSTs began to join the fray. The alien soldiers found themselves falling back as they were met by humanity's elite ODSTs. With the constant flow of elite and fresh troops, the invaders found themselves defeated at every turn, losing what precious ground they had gained.

The tide had turned. They fast learned why the ODSTs were so feared.

Second Eden would not fall.

****APUFMKII****

Turian Frigate; Menae's People

"Tch, only got one of their fighters." The gunnery officer was irked, the missiles he had launched against the fighter squadron had all been evaded save one. And even then it was close as it was had been almost inside the alien cruiser-analogue. Likely trying to head into a safety zone where the ship's own weapons would have brought down the missiles themselves.

To the officer's side, his companion placed a hand on his shoulder. "Ah well, least you did before the one made it inside the zone."

"There is that. You got anything else on your scanners? Mine's clear."

Going through the various scanners modes, he also searched the skies. "Nope. All clear too." A blip appeared on his screen. "Wait a tick. I think I may have something." Going through the various modes, the blip remained the same. "Yeah. I got a contact. No, make that two, three. By the Ancestor, give me a moment to clear this up." Tapping away at the haptic interface before him, the turian officer worked to clear the sensor readings. "Got it! Reading four contacts. They're-" He paused, to reaffirm what the sensors were telling him. "They're fighters? What the hell do they think that'll do against a cruiser? Tickle our shields?" A few of the other officers let out a few laughs at the insinuation. They had no idea how wrong they were.

On the other side, across the now four women fighter squadron, each of them with tear streaked faces, their faces contorted by pure rage eyed the alien frigate-analogue in front of them with pure hate. "Alright ladies," Despite how much the death of Raptor 2-3, 'no Patricia, her name was Patricia' the squadron leader chided herself. However much it hurt, she knew for a fact that 2-4 was hurting worse then she could ever feel. The pair had a sisterly-relationship. Closer than most sisters actually ever were. There were even rumors the pair are, were, lovers.

None of that mattered now. "We've got an alien bastard who thinks they just took down one of the UNSC's best and they are going to get away with it. And what do we say to that?"

"They are going to burn for what they did!" Raptor 2-1 screamed.

"Blood, they will pay their debt in blood." Raptor 2-2 whispered.

"â€|" Raptor 2-4 didn't respond. Her face a stony façade as she glared at the vessel. If looks could kill, the frigate would have burned in an instant.

"Prep Rapier Packages." Across the four Longswords, four missile pods across the wings of each of the fighters, infrared laser designators tagging the alien frigate. "Pick your targets, and cut loose." With that, the fighter squadron broke formation, each heading along their own path towards the comparatively flat ship.

Raptor lead and 2-1 stayed together, the latter trailing behind the former. Tagging a location on the ship, the pair fired a total of eight missiles before pulling off a strafing run, unleashing a wall of 110mm shells that shattered against the shields before banking away and heading back the way they came.

Raptor 2-2 split and headed towards the rear of the ship. Letting loose her four missiles targeted directly at the engines before backing off and following Lead and 2-1.

Seeing the total of twelve, relatively small, missiles heading towards them, the turian crewmen shrugged it off. Not seeing any real threat. It would be their undoing.

Six of the twelve missiles shot ahead of their fellows. Two from each of their pack of four. The tips of these began to glow an iridescent green. A plasma green. The missiles began to close in together as much as possible without colliding. Focusing on a single point. The plasma energized missiles, meant to shatter the shields of a small capital ship upon impact, had a far different effect against Element Zero based barriers. The majority of the missile disintegrated upon hitting the shields, vaporizing on impact. However, the energized plasma ignored the barriers, splattering against and melting the hull. The plasma, from both literally melting the hull, and overloading several systems, weakened the kinetic barrier generators in that particular area. Meanwhile, the remaining four missiles began to line up one behind the other. The first vaporized much like the missiles before it, as did the second, but also exteremely weakened the barriers. The third simply ignored the barrier as though it didn't exist and burrowed a path into the warship, the fourth following suite, burying themselves deep within the ship.

Instead of detonating, the missiles simply sat there. Those who had survived the missile's murderous journey into the bowels of the ship rose. Some shell-shocked by what had just occurred. "Spirits, what just happened?" a turian engineer asked, blood streaming down his head. Looking around, he saw the missiles, just sitting there. "The missiles, they haven't detonated yet. Why?"

Before the engineer could do anything more, he was thrown off his feet as the process repeated itself in the rear of the ship. More missiles slamming into the engines but narrowly missing the engine core. At least, that was most assumed since they weren't free-floating particles. Orders were being shouted to evacuate the damaged sections and anyone that could try to affect damage control.

Outside the ship, Raptor 2-4 searched for a more suitable location to let loose her salvo. Passing by the side of the alien frigate, she

spied what looked to be shuttered windows. A layer of armor that normally would not be deployed outside of combat to allow those inside to see outside. A wicked smile stretched across her face as she targeted her salvo directly at the shutter, firing it off before banking away. Never would she know, that when the two penetrator missiles burrowed their way into the ship, the first would impact the turian officer who had launched the salvo that killed Raptor 2-3.

With the loss of the bridge crew, the turian frigate began to list. Turning sideways and towards the ground. It would never reach it in one piece. The eight missiles that had buried themselves inside, registered the others were now also onboard. Each having burrowed inside. With the confirmation signals received, electricity was sent from internal batteries, triggering the release of neutron particles a small chunk of radioactive matter. Splitting the atoms with the forced addition of another neutron. Following Einstein's equation of mass-to-energy conversion, a massive amount of energy was released from the nuclear fission reaction. Contained for a split second inside the lead-container, it sought an escape. It did not care why it was there, why it was being blocked. All it cared about, was expanding as far as possible as demanded by the laws of entropy and it would not be denied.

In unison, eight low-yield nuclear missiles, each the equivalent of a Fury-tactical nuke, detonated. The missiles of a Rapier Anti-capital ship, meant to cripple the equivalent of a Covenant cruiser, was pitted against a pitiful Turian cruiser.

All that would mark the existence of the once mighty vessel would the glassy crater carved into the planet directly beneath where it once was.

*A/N: Correct me if you think I'm wrong but seeing what the Infinity did in the Spartan Ops episode 1, I think it's shield would be able to take a MAC shot like it's nothing, especially after passing through another ship.

7. Shanxi: Loss

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk II

Thanks to Micheal1110 for betaing this for me. Also, I know I said that I would wait until this is around 10k words but circumstances have forced me to post this now and go on hiatus. Not cause I don't have ideas for the story, but I find myself with less and less time to work and must go onto hiatus.

Any updates will be edits to prior chapters and codex entries.

Please review and let me know what you think of this chapter!

Chapter 7

Shanxi: Espionage, Rescue, Tragedy

****ONI Sec III Safe House: Tero City****

Outside a relatively unassuming looking apartment building dozens on Shellheads and Hunters ambled about. Talking, eating, patrolling. Some writing messages to be sent back home. Inside, though, was the hidden and secure above ground bunker, built for the Office of Naval Intelligence: Sec III. One of a dozen scattered across the planet; each holding enough arms and provisions to keep five men comfortable for days and well-armed, the bunker itself impenetrable to all but the most powerful of dedicated drilling tools. Inside this particular bunker was one man. A scientist, by the name: Doctor Alan Morgan Denton. Considered the leading head of all Forerunner related technologies, bested only by the great Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey. And currently the only ONI Sec III personnel on the planet.

"Great," he said as he placed the cup of now lukewarm coffee, a habit that he had picked up from Halsey when he worked with her back in 2510s and 2520s, "The one day I pick to go on some much needed vacation and I get caught in the middle of a First Contact invasion." Dragging his palm across his face, he groaned. "Why couldn't it have been tomorrow? Least that way my vacation would have been extended." The doctor was not unsympathetic to the colonists and defenders outside the safe house. No, if anything he would gladly have allowed some into the safehouse. However, it had failsafes to detonate several dozen kilos of C-12 High Explosive Plastique if it detected any unauthorized personal. He had simply accepted the situation for what it was and that he was helpless to do anything. He was not a soldier, but a researcher and scientist. And he had long realized the other situation that he was in. For the longest time, since his 'induction' into ONI, he had further made himself invaluable with every single achievement. And yet he was young, having been drafted into ONI Section I in his teenage years. And because of his youth, he was defiant, he fought for what he believed to be right, and because of it he was a pain in the ass to certain individuals. Particularly to one Vice Admiral Margaret C. Paragonsky.

But as hated he was by some, he couldn't simply be removed. No. He was too valuable and too well known for that. If he were to disappear or suddenly die, then HIGHCOM would likely shake the ONI tree to see what secrets came falling out.

He had lost count of the number of times he had been "assigned" to hazardous posts, where by all rights, he should have died. Yet here he was, alive and kicking. Well, perhaps with a few more scars here and there then when he had begun but alive. Planets bordering known Heretic Space, hazardous Forerunner installations, even worlds under the control of the Sangheilli and High Charity, all of them he had been sent, hoping it would be his grave. And this First Contact provided the greatest opportunity the Vice Admiral would ever have. Granting her the first opportunity to send one of her own agents to assassinate him and remain innocent and unsuspected in his death.

And outside the bunker, several buildings away, lying prone under some debris, ONI agent Phoenix watched the entrance to the bunker. "Damn." Muttering under his breathe, he lowered the binoculars, "This is going to be a bitch to get by." The outside of the safehouse had too many shuffling around or near it for him to sneak through. Even with an active camouflage module. "Need a distraction or something." Bringing the binoculars back to his face, he took another look at the

area. Not that far away from the bunker, but at least several hundred meters from him, an obvious command center over there, what looks like a barracks, a mess hall and, "Hello there, what's this?" A triage center: a battlefield hospital within the base. Considering how he saw wounded on beds and aliens running back and forth between them. "Hmmâ€¦that has some opportunities." He thought. Looking again he found something that really caught his eye, or actually, several someones: there was a group of aliens, both Hunters and Shellheads, from the random radio chatter, on both the police and military network (MilNet) he had managed to pick up. Some were wearing armor that were more, hardened, in a sense. They had modifications, couldn't tell what they were for, but any he saw, only a few had them. And the group was in a direction opposite of the safehouse and the extraction route.

Putting away the binoculars, he removed a now outdated but heavily-modified SRS99D-S2 AM Sniper Rifle from his back, along with the special ammunition he had packed just for this mission. The ammo had been modified to pack a lower powder charge so it wouldn't leave a vapor trail back to the shooter. Granted they would be hard-pressed to find him in the dark but he preferred not to take the chance. The rifle itself has been modified to mount a silencer and a shorter barrel. This cut down the range of the weapon to a fraction of its original capability but it would be enough to suit his purpose.

Already prone, he laid down the sniper rifle on the ruined floor, making sure to keep the barrel inside the building. Covering any reflective surface, doing whatever he could to make any chance of detection near nil. Satisfied, he trained the crosshairs on a Shellhead, this one standing inside the battlefield hospital, and if its armor was any indication, an officer. Bringing the crosshairs directly over its center mass, he stopped. Taking a breath, and holding it. Slowing down his body as much as consciously could to reduce any level of sway in the rifle. Then, he pulled the trigger.

A hammer fell. Fire burned. Death flew through the air. All that was heard was a whisper of the wind. In a split second, the modified 12.5 by 114mm Armor-Piercing Fin-Stabilized Discarding-Sabot ammunition flew through the air at a fraction of its optimized velocity, but still it covered the distance between Phoenix and its target in less than a second. The silencer and reduced velocity turn the sound into little more than a hard smack. A noise drowned out by the panic and the noises from the camp. Looking through the scope, he saw his target fall. A Hunter came into view, and he pulled the trigger again. He didn't bother to see if he hit his target. He had already replaced the rifle on his back and began moving for the safehouse entrance.

Back inside the safehouse, Denton finished off the lukewarm coffee before the 'dumb' AI alerted him to someone trying to access the safehouse. "Well, I guess this is it." Standing up, he moved toward the door, an MA6-A series rifle in his hand. Holding it like it was an old friend, he loaded and pulled the charging handle like a veteran. He heard the outer door close, then the inner door open. The airlock was pitch dark. "Well, come on then. Your one of the bitch's agents right? You here to kill me or what?"

"Please, put your weapon down sir. We need to get to the extraction

point." The figure didn't enter the room. The doctor still had the weapon trained on the entrance, and Phoenix could see the safety block had been released; he had heard the bolt cycle and shut close with a round in place. A cycling bolt with a bullet sounds different enough from an empty bolt. "Admiral Paragon'sky sent me herself. I-" A burst let loose in the sound proofed room, slamming into the space just next to the door. The only other sound the shell casings as they clattered onto the floor.

"See that doesn't help your case. She's the bitch that's tried to have me killed for the past several years. If you really are here to extract me, then toss your weapons, and I mean all of them, into the room and then your helmet. Then you walk in here. And maybe I'll consider leaving with you." To the doctor's surprise, the ONI SpecOps Agent did exactly that with little hesitation: an old modified BR55HB-SR "Battle Rifle", with a slimmer profile and lacking the tactical scope and instead sporting a red dot sight, a modified SRS99D-S2 AM Sniper Rifle, and a silenced M7-B series Magnum pistol. "Alright get in here." Lowering the rifle, but not relocking the safety. "Give me a moment to get ready and we'll get out of here."

Phoenix stepped forward and took his gear. First donning his helmet before walking into the light, then grabbing the rest of his weapons and gear, replacing them back in their proper places. "Doctor we don't have the time, if you haven't saved it into a moveable data packet then leave it. We need to leave now."

"I realize that, which is why I am activating Locust protocol. We can't leave anything here to these new aliens." Locust Protocol was a command that should anyone enter the safe house without a proper ONI Sec III IFF(Identify Friend or Foe) Tag, charges inside the safehouse would detonate, causing an implosion shortly after a data purge. Otherwise, anything inside could be salvaged later. "Let go."

****Tero City: Courthouse****

The pair had left the safehouse behind some time ago and entered the Courthouse through an unsecured, and still intact, back entrance. The entrances to where the Human prisoners were being held had been sealed off by their alien captors. Forcing the pair to travel via the secondary levels, the only access to which remaining was the door they had entered through. A forced path by the fact that as the rear of the Courthouse had all but collapsed and this was the shortest route to a secondary hidden ONI emergency vehicle hideaway. Standard operating procedure for ONI was to have emergency secondary extraction vehicle Problem be a considerable distance from the primary safehouse. For the pair though, , the main problem was the doctor's, as Phoenix called it, "Bloody Noble heart".

"I told you before doctor, we can't do anything for them." Phoenix whispered as they quietly traversed the second level. "Leave them."

"Bullshit! I refuse to leave those people behind!" He replied in a harsh but low voice. "We can save these people, we can-urk!" The ONI SpecOps Agent had grabbed Denton by the throat and had brought him face to helmet. The doctor seeing only the barest reflection of his face in the visor in the low light.

"Even if we tried to save all these people, we can't take them anywhere. The extraction vehicle, at most will hold a dozen, maybe a few more. There are Hundreds of people here doctor. We couldn't save them if we wanted." Letting Denton go, he turned round again, "If you're done doctor we need to go. Extraction vehicle isn't far now."

The doctor turned his head, looking down on the people just below him, totally oblivious to his presence. A man tending to a wounded woman, a wife or girlfriend if the looks they were giving each other was any sign. A child being comforted by someone that was obviously not family, families and couples huddled together around what light and fires there were. He turned his heart heavy, and moved to follow the SpecOps agent when he heard a language he had not heard in months. The tongue of the Sanghelios.

"Get off of her!" It was a rough, harsh voice. Male. When he looked again, he saw a male Sangheili, just shy of seven feet tall, a juvenile, barely an adult by Human standards, and obviously wounded, based on the bandages on his body, had tried to attack one of the aliens, a Shellhead. Though his efforts were futile as due to alien's girth, and his own wounds, was tossed easily aside. He saw the wounded Sangheili soon surrounded by other Humans. But his attention was caught by yells coming from the Shellhead. No, from what he held in his hand. A young female Sangheili, similar in age, if a bit older than the male of her species.

"Get this chatta off of me! Help!" A chill went down his body. No matter what, however bad the situation, did Sangeheili ever cry out for help. Granted she was young but, "Shit! Get this bastard away from-AH!" The bastard had hit her! It was obvious what was going on, this Shellhead, for whatever reasons, had decided to beat on the prisoners. It was obvious why its compatriots were not trying to stop him. Some were standing there watching, whilst others were too far off in the background to know what was going on. In the corner of his eye, he saw a small pile of corpses, previous victims of the alien's bloodlust. He pulled up his assault rifle and started to pull down-

A hand slammed down on the rifle, forcing the barrel of the weapon down and his finger away from the trigger. "Hey, what the hell are you doing! I said we needed to get the hell out of here!"

"Do you see what is going on here!" He snarled back, "We can't leave them here!"

Phoenix grabbed Denton by the shirt again. "We have to!" Ripping the rifle out of the doctor's hands, he stepped back. "I am not about to risk my life or yours just because of your fucking bleeding heart! My orders are to get you out of the city and back into UNSC-Controlled territory. Now you your ass doctor and follow me to the extraction point."

Denton didn't say a thing, he didn't need to. Instead, ignoring the SpecOps agent, he turned towards the Shellhead, drawing his M7-C series Misirah Armories Magnum pistol and pulled the trigger. The gunshot thundered throughout the courthouse, just moments after the 12.7 M225 Semi-Armor-Piercing High-Explosive round slammed into the Shellhead, entering through the hump and exiting out its face.

Then, all hell broke loose.

Screams of panic as Human prisoners ran trying to avoid an future gunshots, the roars of the aliens as they tried to figure out where the shot had come from, and more gunshots as the doctor used his neural implant to link with the internal smart-scope, taking aim and firing upon the aliens further away. The staccato of rifle fire soon joined the fray as Phoenix opened fire with the Doctor's rifle.

"Over here!" The doctor called out, waving to the people below, "Come on, we got to get out of here!" A stampede soon began as people began rushing for the pair. People were trampled underfoot as they tried to get to their believed rescuers. The first ones to reach them were the Sangheilli pair, who helped up several others, and were the process of helping others onto the second level when death came.

They heard a roar as another Shellhead had charged into the midst of the scrambling prisoners. Beating it fists upon whomever and whatever it could reach. A young woman suffered a punch so hard that she slammed into the wall, three feet away. The blood trail on the wall as she fell was a clear sign she was dead. An elderly man was thrown into a group of people, knocking them all down. Before it could try to do so again, a group of men, at least a dozen strong, and all of them burly, obviously bodybuilders or something similar, jumped on the Shellhead. Each of them had bruises, casts, or some sort of injury caused by the Aliens, and they all wanted their pound of flesh. Even wounded, the twelve managed to weigh it down, beating upon its face with whatever they could get their hands on. One of them produced a makeshift shiv, and stabbed it in the Shellhead's eye. It roared in agony as the shiv entered the body, but couldn't move with all the weight upon it, which only increased as more left the scramble and joined in on the beating.

More and more people were being helped unto the second level by the Sangheilli pair and several others, the doctor directing them down towards the direction Phoenix had been taking him. Until suddenly Phoenix cried out, "DOWN!" Denton, Phoenix, the Sangheilli and few others all dropped to the ground, or close as they could. It saved their lives.

A split second later, bullets rained into the courthouse. Killing anyone unlucky enough to be out of cover, those above having the only cover by the angle of the fire, human prisoners were ruthlessly cut down by their captors. No quarter was given. By the time the bullets stopped firing, the only noises were the groans of the dying, the hissing of the alien weapons as they cooled and the harsh breathing on the few hidden survivors on the upper floor. In the background, faint cries could be heard in the distance along with the sounds of more weapons fire.

Sliding over towards Denton, Phoenix snarled, "Now you see what your bleeding heart got you? Before these people might have been saved, but now, now they're all dead." Denton didn't respond, he was staring towards the face of a young woman, no older than 20, her face permanently frozen her terror, her hand faintly grasping the edge of the second floor. "Now, let's get to the extraction point and no further incidents from here on agreed?" Not bothering to wait for a response, Phoenix turned to the rest, "if you want to get out of here, you do what I say, when I say. Try and be a smartass or a hero,

and I'll fucking shoot you myself. Now follow me."

8. Shanxi: Aftermath

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk II

A/N: 1: Beginning of a subplot here with an OC developed by a friend. Doing so at his request. You'll know what I mean when you read it. Another A/N at the bottom.

Sorry for the lateness and shortness of this chapter, RL got in the way and I haven't been able to work on the story until this month. Hopefully I can start pumping chapters out faster. This is quite the filler chapter and after which the pace will pick up. It's a bit rushed. Due to the fact that I no longer remember who, if at all, betaed these chapters for me, please remind me who you are. If they do not, I will post an alert chapter. That said, this will probably be edited later on and reposted. If you haven't already, chapters 1-4 have been edited and reposted.

As Always please Read and Review.

Chapter 8

Shanxi: Aftermath

"They told me to fight, and that's what I've done. Let historians sort through the wreckage, bodies, and broken lives to figure out the rest."

â€" Admiral Preston Cole, Circe 2525

****Bridge: UNSC Infinity-Class Warship: Era of Retaliation****

Rear Admiral Jesse De La Rosa watched from his ship, rotated so that the bridge was facing the planet, the war torn colony of Shanxi. The once colony that had been called a paradise, the colony that was supposed to mark the true beginning of a new age of peace and prosperity, burned. What was supposed to be the final chapter on the Human-Covenant War and the wars immediately thereafter was now the first chapter in of a new era, of another war.

Below him fires still burned across the planet as they routed the last few pockets of enemy resistance. They had taken multiple prisoners but the majority had chosen to die, most by battle, a scant few by suicides. Similar to Japanese soldiers during World War II. His attention was focused on the remains of Babel, or rather, the irradiated crater that was the base of Babel. It was just one of just over a dozen or so craters that now pocket-marked Shanxi's surface.

He sighed. It had come from the alien's final shot. When all the Type-1s had retreated back through the artifact, the Type-2s continued to fight, some with a greater ferocity than before. But without assistance from the Type-1s, they proved to be of little danger to the ships of the UNSC. There were no longer any tactics or strategy, just pure hard-headed battleplans. The remaining Type-2s simply opened fire with all they had but it was scattered, no concentrated fire or any maneuvers whatsoever. They quickly decimated

the remaining Type-2s and the other unclassified warships.

At the last moment however, the Type-2 cruiser tonnage vessel, its hull punctured by a H-MAC shot from a Light-Cruiser the Dawn of David, clean through and through and most of its outer hull peeled off by the same cruiser's L-MAC shots, in a moment of rage or desperation, reoriented its bow to towards the planet.

At that moment, every ship captain knew what about to happen. What would happen and the futility in trying to stop it. Yet even so, every single captain ordered their ships and maximum velocity towards the Type-2 variant alien cruiser. Even the Rear Admiral himself had tried, by God Almighty they had tried, but it was all in vain.

With what was very well its last breath, the alien cruiser-weight craft fired at Shanxi. A light-frigate, Forward Unto Dawn, one of the few that had been tasked to planetside duty had attempted to intercept the shot. Its engines flaring a bright white, its hull creaking as it was pushed to its limits and beyond. Inside its reactors were pushed into the red zone, her engineers trying to push out more and more power out the ship while making sure they did not detonate in the process. Their effort had almost succeeded. The nose of the ship had entered the path of the shot a second after before. Sure the ship would be destroyed but it was a sacrifice the crew of the frigate had been all too ready to make. Yet it was not to be. What hit the ship was an empty shell, a carrier unit for the payload within. Moments before the Dawn had arrived, the alien round had shattered itself. Not by accident, but by design. Within had been a dozen nuclear warheads of equal payloads. The moment the casing had come apart, the warheads had separated themselves and gone off on their own our, separate paths.

A minute after the alien cruiser's shot, mushroom clouds dotted the planet. Whatever pyrrhic victory the shooters had felt, did not last long enough for them to enjoy it. A split-second later, every single piece of ordinance from the Shanxi Liberation Fleet from autocannons to Archer Pod Missiles and Hades-Class Nuclear missiles and H-MACs from the Retaliation itself slammed into the alien warship. The UNSC Fleet did not stop until the magnetic coils had overheated, Archer pods had been emptied and autocannon reserves exhausted.

And here the Rear Admiral stood. They had taken back Shanxi, with far less in-battle-casualties than had been expected. But still, this was a pyrrhic victory. This colony had been meant to mark the beginning of a new era. Of a true end to the era of warfare that had left a black mark on Humanity for decades. Now, it seemed, Shanxi would just be another beginning to a new war. Not to mention the lives already lost planetside. Those within Second Eden survived, as did all who managed to reach the city before things really went to hell. But so many had been stranded outside the city, or killed in the first day. What was worse was the number that had been killed during the time the fleet had been moving with all haste towards Shanxi. And then, there were the death damps. Least that was what those who had been assigned the duty of clearing out the enemy bases were calling it. The number of the colonists that survived accounted for less than twenty percent of the colony's total population.

Twenty.

Fucking.

Percent.

Of a colony of almost half a million. Most of those numbers were currently rated as missing. But they had found the death camps. Where only Christ knows how many people were executed in cold blood. The bodies had been piled as people climbed over the dead to reach, anything. Anything that could promise them a false hope. The clean-up effort had already begun. The bodies removed, tagged and the families notified. Of course ONI had gotten their people off the planet. It was only one man but still.

The Era had intercepted an old Blackcat-Class subprowler as it exited atmosphere. On it had been survivors from the planet, along with a single ONI Sec-III Special Operations, Reconnaissance, Tactics, Engineering and Deconstruction, or SORTED, trooper. Not the greatest of names but it defined their purpose. They were an all-purpose special operations division. For when you need skill beyond that of normal special operations but needed to operate under the radar, as Sec-III always did. Considering the Spartan Program was no longer under the domain of Sec-III. The other survivors had been from the local UNSC detachment on the planet, an odd group of young men and women and two Sangheilis. Their debriefing would be handled by others. Right now his efforts were focused on the planet, and making sure that no ship went off on some vendetta through the artifact.

But Rear Admiral Jesse De La Rosa couldn't help but shake the feeling that this would not end so easily as this battle had.

****Citadel: Presidium: Council's Private Chambers****

"You and Torsk did WHAT!" Tevos yelled. The usually prim and proper Asari Matriarch and Councilor yelled. Having lost her composure for the first time since her daughter had told her she was bonding with a Krogan, at what she and the other Councilors had just been told. "Are you telling me you encountered an unknown species and deliberately," stressing the word "attacked them? By the Goddess what were you thinking?"

The four Councilors and the remaining commanding officer from what is now being tentatively labeled as the Relay 314 Incident, were, for all intents and purposes, interrogating Desolas Arterius., currently stripped of all ranks and honors related to his command. News of his sudden and dishonorable discharge from the Turian Armed Forces was still unknown but the first people in the room knew it was only a matter of time.

"Yes I would like to know that as well." Urdnot Wrex, current Councilor for the Krogan Empire. "We Krogan, before we had inflicted ourselves with the genophage, were arguably the most conflict prone species in the galaxy. And I find myself shocked by what you have done." Turning towards his Turian counterpart he asked, "Teranus, what do you have to say about this?"

Teranus, a relatively young Turian who had been be given the right to Councilorship sighed. This was his first real issue that he had presented to his since her appointment no so long ago. Straightening himself he asked, "Arterius, tell me." He started, putting his talons

together, "What possessed you to assault this new species? By your own statements, and that of your remaining crews along with flight recorder information, you attacked without provocation."

"They were in violation of Council Law." He answered. "They were the process of activating a Primary Mass Relay when we had discovered them. In accordance with Council Law I and Torsk moved to stop them." Choosing his words carefully he stated, "When they did respond to our hails, I ordered a warning shot to be fired at what I believed to be the alien's version of a dreadnought. Soon after, the alien warship attacked my fleet and destroyed two of my ships. Once they had activated the Relay, they traveled through it. Gathering our forces, we followed soon after."

"This is where I find things to be interesting Arterius." Teranus started. "You stated they came through the Mass Relay, but then stated that they were in the process of activating one. You know as well as I do that the power used to activate one relay is also used to activate its counterpart at the other end."

"I realize that Councilors but it is what I saw. I have no explanation for it."

"Perhaps," the Salarian Councilor interrupted, "this is what occurs when two primary relays exist in the same system? After all this is the one system where we have discovered two primary relays and a secondary relay."

"Perhaps." Teranus agreed. "For now, I still have questions." As the other councilors continued to question the former-General, Wrex looked out towards the Mass Relay, which was little more than a bright blue light at this distance. Wondering just what would be the consequences from this. His gut told him it would not be long until they found out. And that when they did, no one was walking away from this unscathed.

****UNSC: Era of Retaliation: Secondary Medical Bay****

Squid hissed and rose as the doctor applied the disinfectant to his wounds. "Oi! Keep still Squiddy! Or do I have to get your girlfriend in her again?" The doctor demanded, referring to, not Serana but Katy. The young woman proved to be one hell of a spitfire. Especially considering how she had slapped Squid hard enough to forcible turn his head. Giving him one hell of a dressing down when he tried to be a "Strong Sangheili" warrior and refuse medical treatment. The threat of bringing her back was enough to calm him down and sat back down. "Good. Now if you'll keep still for a little longer maybe we can get done this century."

It was a similar scene all around him, the rest of his friends along with the other few survivors that joined them and survived the slaughter at the internment camp were receiving medical treatment for any injuries they suffered.

'Hood' was getting his arm re-broken and reset. When they had put his arm in the sling, they had accidentally misaligned the bone. Now they were taking steps to make sure it healed properly. Katy had already left, having only slight bruising. She was the luckiest of those injured. Alexei was being treated for severe bruising and his cracked ribs. He was currently being placed in a large body-cast like

wrapping to help facilitate the healing. His hands were already wrapped in a similar manner, by luck or fate he had managed to avoid any sort of head trauma when he was forced to brawl with the Shellheads. Maho was being treated for a busted jaw and a concussion. He had gotten into a brawl with some of the other prisoners who didn't like his efforts to try and keep everyone's morale up with his jokes. Cris was more or less uninjured. He had suffered only a few deep cuts from close shots and shrapnel. But Serana had been the worst off.

She had suffered more than a few gunshot wounds, glancing shots from when they had made their initial escape. She had refused to say anything of it and had kept quiet until she had passed out from blood loss on the Blackcat-Class Subprowler. No one had noticed her bleeding due to the darkness of the night as they traveled and her own dark clothes. The slightly darker color the clothes had gained from the moisture was barely noticeable. Right now they had just finished working on her on one of the designated surgical beds inside the Medbay. What was interesting was how, aside from the medical staff, someone had shown a keen interest in Serana. In fact, before she had collapsed from the blood loss, the man that helped saved them, Alan Denton, had stolen more than a few covert looks at her, and had turned away when she tried to face him. Now he was keeping a permanent vigil over her.

The friends shared a look between each other, least those that could. If this Alan attempted anything, court martial be damned they would show him the other end of the closest airlock.

What the group of friends didn't know though, was that Alex had no intentions of letting the female Sangheili before him come to any harm. It was not as though he had been disenfranchised, that he preferred to company of other species other than his own or no company at all to that of his fellow man. Rather that due to his experiences, he was perhaps the most open-minded and accepting human being in all of known space. For that reason he stood a personal vigil over the young Sangheili woman. When he saw her, he felt an emotion he had not felt for the longest time. Desire, infatuation. His work left little time for such things. Yet, when he saw her, it was, different. What caught his attention strangely enough were her eyes. They drew his attention and he found himself looking more and more.

Now here he was, despite her being unconscious, he felt more along the lines of a sort of honor guard. Least until she woke up, then perhaps he could- "Ohhh."

Speak of the devil and he, or rather she, shall appear. Pressing a hand down on her shoulder he said, "Easy there, you just came out of surgery. Doctors say you're lucky to still be standing, even for one of your kind." Serana didn't recognize the voice but felt the honesty in the stranger's words and felt comfortable enough to relax. "You were lucky you know. These new generation of doctors knowing how to treat not just humans but other species as well."

Her eyes still shut she asked. "Where am I?"

"INF-101 class vessel UNSC Era of Retaliation. Would you like me to run off the serial number for you too?"

"Who are you? Where are my friends?" Serana asked. She started fidgeting as she tried to get up, but Alex's hand pressing down on her and her own weariness kept her from rising."

A voice from behind Alex answered her. "We're here Serana." 'Hood' answered. "All of us. Maho has his jaw taped shut but frankly that's an improvement." Muffled cries sounded out in protest at his statement. "But otherwise we're all going to be. You gave us quite a scare." Turning his attention to Alex he asked, "The rest of us are curious too. Just who are you? Not anyone ranks a SORTED trooper extraction."

Letting go of Serana, he pulled back and leaned into his chair. "Professor Alex Morgan Denton. Office of Naval Intelligence: Section III. And very pissed off his vacation has just been ruined." 'and infatuated with the woman in the bed right now.' He added in his mind.

"Wait, Professor Denton?" Cris asked, stepping closer towards the professor. "As in the man second only to Halsey regarding Forerunner Technologies? As in the man who helped fast produce a navy after the attack on Earth?" By this time the rest of the group had left their own beds and approached their friends. Though now all of their attention was focused on the older man before them.

"Yes that man." Alex answered. Getting up, he said, "I'm going to have a word with the captain of the ship. I'd suggest all of you recover quickly. I have a feeling this war has only just begun." Sparing one last glance at Serana, he turned and headed for the exit.

After the doors had closed behind, Serana had risen to sitting position and asked, "Is it normal for humans to stand guard over a total stranger while they are asleep?"

****Epsilon Eridanus System: Planet Reach: UNSC HighCom Facility****

The holodisplay shut down as the digital three-dimensional reproduction of the Battle over Shanxi concluded. The footage had been sent by the Prowler, Evening's Light, covertly attached to the battle group sent to liberate Shanxi. The people who had just watched the battle, no not even a battle, it was a slaughter. They may have lost a few of their own ships, but by comparison to the losses suffered over the course of the Human-Covenant war, it was a paltry number.

The people meeting together were the same people who had sent the Rear Admiral to retake Shanxi. Lord Hood was the first to speak. "So, what course do we assume?" He asked. They all knew the reason why he asked the question. This was another First Contact scenario and war seemed to be just around the corner. Every single person in the room realized, if they went to war, this would be another Human-Covenant War, but technologically, Humanity would be this species' Covenant. "By what we have seen ourselves, we would have little issues against this new species with the exception of numbers. From what we have gathered, they are most likely capable of fielding far more vessels than we currently are."

"There is not to mention the fact that their version of FTL travel allows them to change the battlefield scenario from a firefight to a

bloody boxing match." Whitcomb added. "Damn suicidal bastards just charge head-in where we can't even use our MACs against them."

"Even so, if we were to engage them in any sort of serious war capacity, there is very little doubt it would be a hard conflict." Hood paused as he looked into the eyes of every human officer in the room. "And I refuse to become like the Covenant of old."

"Yet you, no we, can not allow this." Thel Vadam said. Though he was not a human, he had started to see humanity and the New Covenant as separate entities as time passed. "If we allow this, these upstarts may presume to attack us yet again."

"If I may offer a suggestion." All the attention in the room turned to Colonel Ackerson. He stood and began to walk around the room where the meeting was taking place. "From the information we have been sent, these 'upstarts' as you call them," nodding to the Arbiter, "are part of a larger alien coalition. As a compromise, I suggest that we send a strike force to several planets of the aggressor species. Show that we will not take this, war crime, sitting down. However, we send an envoy to this," he paused to refer to his tac-pad mounted on his forearm. "Citadel, 'discovering' it as we 'searched' for additional planets, and sue for peace." He said focusing on Lord Hood and Jeromi, Stanforth and Sesa' Refumee. "If the aggressor species is unresponsive to our demands, but the others are not, we simply grant a formal declaration against only the aggressor species." This time focusing on Paragon'sky, Thel and Rtas'. "If that is agreeable?"

The others began to discuss amongst themselves Ackerson smirked internally. There was little to no chance his suggestion would not be accepted. It appealed to all of those in attendance in some way or form. His Special Programs would also draw more funding as they moved to war footing, even if only temporarily. He and Paragon'sky and her protégé, Osman, had already discussed this at length aboard the Vice Admiral's personal prowler, The Shadow's Day. Prowler names had, in recent vessels, had always been some form of oxymoron, reflecting the shadowy nature of the ONI itself.

As the discussions ended, Ackerson turned his attention back to the meeting. "Very well than Colonel, as you have suggested; we will begin plans for retaliatory action and if necessary, total conflict. Until then, dismissed."

As the highest ranking officers of the Alliance left the room, Lord Hood stayed behind. Despite it having been many years since the fall of the Old Covenant, he still appeared as he did during the first invasion of Earth. After so many years of conflict, and now after they had just finished one era of war, and a short one of peace, Humanity would march forward to into the arms of war again. "May God have mercy upon our souls."

Preview

"To all Alliance ships in Relic Space, move in on Palaven. 'The Great Mountain' has been found, I repeat, 'The Great Mountain' has been found."

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk II

A/N: Will refer to Human-Covenant War as The Great War from now on for the most part.

Warning, partial backstory spoilers for Halo 4 and the Novel: Halo: Crytum.

A/N: People have been saying they think I've made the UNSC seem weak. Well hopefully this changes your minds. Also, shield technologies. There will be or already have been, a surge in codex entries. I try to address as many holes people point out to me as personally as possible. And am grateful. This is just a blanket solution.

Also, sorry for piss poor quality of chapter. Will work on edit sometime in the future.

Betaed by Micheal11110

Also, kept promise of quick update. Lets see if I can keep it going!

Terminology for this chapter

Port: left

Starboard: right

Bow: front

Stern: back

Chapter 9

UNSC: Retaliation

****Citadel: Private Councilor Chambers****

Five Earth Weeks since the Events of Shanxi

The Councilors were having an informal meeting inside a room designed and made to act as a Faraday Cage, meaning the entire room was totally sealed off. Once the doors had closed, no signals of any sort could enter or exit the room. Least in theory.

They had decided to conduct an informal meeting to discuss the events from two weeks ago. Events that shook Galactic Society as they knew it to its core.

Tevos finished her drink and replaced the cup on the table. "So, what have your people reported so far? Any news?"

Teranus leaned forward and put the tips of his talons together. "We've expanded the shipyards around Palaven and have begun construction of three others in Volus Protectorate space with their permission. But it will be time before we can recoup our losses. Aepheus was a terrible blow." Some time ago, the Turian Hierarchy had lost all contact with their largest shipyards outside of their home system. Transmissions had simply ceased to come in and when a task

force had been sent to investigate they found the planet in tatters. The shipyards and the ships had been, for lack of a better term, melted. Evidenced remained of energized gasses or plasma, but it was inconclusive.

Wrex crossed his arms as he leaned back into the wall. "We're rebuilding the facilities over Mantun, but it's going to weeks, months even, before we're even close to what we were producing at its peak. Right now our fuel supply lines have tripled. We're making deals with whoever we can to try and offset the losses." The Krogans had lost Mantun, a planet known for its incredible capability to produce anti-protons for interstellar travel. It had similar to the situation at Aepheus however the weapons used were obviously projectile based. Great tears had been made and ships were gutted from stem to stern by what appeared to be a single shot. The orbital solar energy collection stations had been totally obliterated, to the point where they were worth more as scrap than actual salvage. What was radically different from the Turian situation was what had happened on the ground.

Unlike at Aepheus, where planetary installations, barring communication stations, had been untouched, at Mantun, every single installation had been destroyed by heavy orbital bombardment. Everything from the planetary guns, which were now little more than craters larger than the weapons themselves, to barracks, now piles of rubble, had been targeted.

"Interesting how they only attacked and then abandoned the system." Vald'n, the Salarian council said. "It's not hit and run tactics as they totally decimated the planets and their strategic value. They made sure every single component of the shipyards and the solar collection stations had been destroyed. If had been a hit-and-run, than they would have only destroyed a few components before fleeing." He paused, making sure he had the attention of the other Councilors. "I can think of very few reasons for this. One being that these battles dealt them far more casualties than they had expected or could handle, and had taken all of their technology back with them. Another being that they didn't know the value of the planet. Simply striking at what they saw as an enemy held world and dealing as much damage before leaving. Or, and most likely and disturbing is this: they recognized the strategic values of these worlds to us, but they are of little importance to them."

His last statement made the entire group tense. They had assumed these species were relatively primitive in comparison to them, as it seemed they still relied on chemical-based projectiles and explosives for the most part as opposed to mass accelerators and anti-matter based explosives. These two attacks changed that view. Rather than capture or even leave intact to reverse-engineer, these new species simply destroyed the defending ships and orbital stations. All of the Councilors were hoping Vald'n was wrong about the third reason why they were so through.

"Very well then," Tevos began, "do any of us have-" she was interrupted by a knocking on the door. Though the room was private and set up against electronic-espionage, they could still be notified if needed. "One moment." She rose and moved towards the double doors. When she opened them, she found herself facing a very harried young Asari, still in her maiden days. Sweat bead on her face, her eyes wide, evidence whatever news she had was likely disturbing indeed.

"Well, what has happened?"

Gasping the maiden replied, "Councilors, I apologize but, an alien ship has just appeared Citadel space and, you need to see this for yourself."

Moments later, the four Councilors had arrived at the Central Tower of the Citadel, granting them a view of the entirety of the Citadel. What they saw before them resulted in a myriad of reactions. The Salarian Councilor started muttering about impossibilities and theoritics. The Turian Councilor stood stock still, his facial features and appendages fallen taut. The Asari Councilor closed her eyes and began muttering a soft prayer to Athame. Wrex simply crossed his arms and started cursing under his breath and damning Torsk evening more to the lowest pits of Kalros's shit pile.

For in the middle of the space between the wings of the Citadel stood a single vessel, a warship if its design and all the obvious weapons emplacements were not a dead giveaway. It was massive, as tall as the Destiny Ascension, if not taller, and half again as long as a Turian Dreadnought. But it was still only one ship.

"How did it get past all the fleet?"

"A great disk just appeared sirs. Right there, behind where that alien dreadnought is sitting." That bit of information unsettled everyone who heard it. Before they had assumed the alien's FTL allowed to travel outside the limits of the Mass Relays, but had assumed they had a limited range. This new information destroyed that notion. If these aliens could travel to wherever they wished, what was to stop them from reaching their homeworlds?

Meanwhile, on the UNSC Valiant-Class Super-heavy Cruiser, Kanchenjunga, Ambassador Dondle Udina watched the alien space station, the so called 'Citadel' with a disgusted face. "They call this their Citadel?" He said, sneering at it. "This place is barely twice as big as a CSO." Turning to face the holo-emitter, currently displaying the face of Fleet Admiral Lord Hood, he continued, "Damn it I shouldn't even be here! I know I'm the official ambassador but damn it, you know as well as I do that Dalton would be better suited for this! He's had more contact with the New Covenant since the end of the war than I have!" The UNSC had decided on a sort of blitzkrieg tactics for their initial retaliation against the Turians and Krogan. Utter decimation to show their power before attempting negotiations. If they asked why they were only coming here now, they would simply play coy and claim that they had discovered the Citadel when searching for other targets.

Hood raised his hand, "I know that ambassador but as of right now he has other duties that he must attend to. And that is precisely why he is not here. He knows the Covenant better than anyone else, but you know politics and dealing with non-humans. We need our best out there. Not to mention we may need him." The underlying message was clearly understood by both men. Nearly everyone and everything sent for these negotiations were to the UNSC, for all intents and purposes, expendable. The Kanchenjunga, the Valiant-series had remained unchanged since the Great War and would soon be phased out of the UNSC Navy and handed over to the CDF. The crew itself had no people that could not be replaced, as cruel as that may sound. Over the course of the Great War, Hood and many others of the UNSC HIGHCOM

had to make many hard decisions, becoming easier as the war dragged on. This was simply another hard choice. Even the ambassador as he had a protégé ready to take over his position, or least was a candidate, for when he retired. "Record everything you can and sent it back to us. We'll be listening." With that Hood ended the link. The ambassador turning back towards the window and muttering under his breath, "Let's get this show on the road."

**** Three Weeks since the events of Shanxi. Two weeks before UNSC arrival at the Citadel****

Krogan Empire Territory

Nith System: Planet Mantun

Hailot Garchek was a relatively young Krogan, having only recently finished his rite of passage on Tuchanka and signed up with the military. Despite all their advancements, both technologically and culturally, the Rite of Passage was still something deeply ingrained in both Krogan society and biology. Their blood would literally demand that they do this. After which however, many Krogan became what the Galaxy had come to accept as a normal citizen. Their military was still as powerful as before the Genophage as it was called. The scientist who had developed it, for some reason, believed the Krogan no longer deserved to survive. His virus would have wiped out the Krogan over time by their very own nature and the drastically reduced birth rate. Thankfully cooler heads had prevailed.

Currently he was stationed on the Hammer-Class Cruiser, The Caldron, as one of sensor station officers. The Caldron was one of many cruisers along with even more frigates and a dreadnought guarding the planet and its solar arrays. Overall there were over a hundred ships around the planet. The planet itself was both militarily and economically important. The solar arrays provided power to anti-proton production facilities on the planet. It alone provided the Krogan Empire's Navy with almost the entirety of its fuel. If it was lost, the cost to replace the arrays and/or the planetside facilities would be phenomenal. Not to mention the trade the planet brought for the Krogan as a good deal of its production was also sold to the rest of the galaxy.

In addition to the massive fleet in orbit around Mantun alone, the planet itself boasted several impressive planet-to-space mass accelerator cannons, far more powerful than anything fielded by any warship of the day, and these things were already centuries old. Making any, far as he was concerned, attack on the planet, suicidal. If just one of the massive storage unit of anti-protons was raided, the profits from such a raid would be enormous, but the cost in vessels and personnel turned off most would be pirates.

He leaned back, well as far as a Krogan could, in his chair. "Another cycle, another na-" Sirens started blaring across the ship. "What's going on!"

"All hands, general quarters! Detecting unknown anomaly. All hands prepare for combat." As Garchek readied his station he recalled the strange new orders that had been sent out by the Councilors themselves not too long ago. Apparently a Krogan and Turian patrol fleet had attacked the colony of an hitherto unknown species. 'By Kalros, that's one way to make an impression.' All military forces

were to be ready for an imminent counterattack by these new species. These aliens didn't use the mass relays for long distance FTL, at least, they did not rely on them. They were able to travel to any location and their arrival was likely to be presided by a spacial anomaly. It was described as a great disk simply appearing in the vastness of space. Like,

Like was appearing just outside the range of the planetary guns. His display pinged as something began to exit from the disk. "Contact!" The vessel's design was not unlike the Krogan, all utilitarian design for one purpose, war. "Reading one contact, cruiser-tonnage, no two, four, five, seven—" More and more pings came from his and that other sensor stations, when they stopped he readout the number. "Final count: twenty-five cruiser-tonnage warships. F-f-fifteen dreadnoughts, and—" three vessels, measuring three times the length of the Destiny Ascension. And one," He paused, making sure the sensors were reading correctly, " His readout was heard loud and clear to everyone on the bridge. Dead silence reigned. The Treaty of Farixen limited the number of dreadnoughts each species was allowed to build and field, but thanks to the Krogan the number was incredibly high. However, the number of dreadnoughts actually in service was low, due to the cost in building, fielding, maintaining and supplying a vast number of dreadnoughts. That this new species had the capability of fielding so many cruisers and dreadnoughts was mind-numbing, but along with three, what were likely and essentially, super-dreadnoughts, the prospects were terrifying. And every single Krogan near the planet began to curse Torsk to the lowest levels of the pits for bringing such an enemy upon them.

The general was known to have the most ruthless, blood thirsty and warmongers amongst the Krogan as part of his crew and his army. They alone had, in one single bloody raid, had almost destroyed the reputation of the Krogan people permanently to a destructive, warmongering race. Torsk had been tasked to a raid of a pirate held planet on the Council Space/Terminus border. Rather than send in the Spectres, the Council had chosen for a rare display of their power. They had hoped to simply eradicate what they thought was a simple pirate base built into an asteroid. They were wrong.

The mined out asteroid was not simply a pirate base, but an entire city. An infant compared to the Citadel of the Terminus; Omega, but a city nonetheless. Filled with people, families, these may have been pirates but nonetheless, many of them were simply bystanders or related to the pirates. Torsk had learned of it the moment his fleet and dreadnought had appeared in system. The pirates had immediately called out a surrender and declared the nature of their population. Torsk simply ignored the calls, refused to report to Council and attacked. 'No' Garchek shook his head, 'attack means they had a fighting chance.' The pirates and every single citizen on the station had been slaughtered. There even evidence of consumption of other sentient species, but Torsk had passed it off as Varren having eaten the corpses of the pirates. Evidence said otherwise but due to the damage to the bodies, it had been circumstantial at best. After which, he had been sent to the boonies of Citadel space by the Krogan Empire Councilor, Urdnot Wrex, while he tried to save the reputation of the Krogan people before it was too late. Thankfully, he had been successful.

His console pinged, marking another contact. "Another contact, now making sixteen dreadnoughts!"

"They already have fifteen! What reason could they have brought this one in so late!" His commanding officer yelled. "Alert the planet and send a message to Tuchanka! Alien contact! Unknowns!"

"Sir, this one is different sir." Answering the question before it was asked, "This one, sensor reading it's incredibly thin sir. Projected mass readings put it at half of one our own dreadnoughts." That didn't make sense. Why build something so large, yet have it so thin? If it was a dreadnought, it would shatter after a single strike. "It's taking position at the rear of their," he paused, unsure what to call it, "armada." That at least was making sense. "Wait. Sir, the new contact, I'm reading a massive energy buil-"

From the dreadnought length, thin vessel, its front flashed bright orange, interrupting Garchek midsentence.

A half second later, the communications on every ship guarding the planet squealed in an electronic scream as three cruisers, and six frigates were utterly obliterated. Even from what was a glancing shot, the kinetic energy of the shot completely shattered the superstructure of the warships as the massive fifteen hundred ton ferro-magnetic slug traveled at its intended target. One of the Solar-collection stations in orbit. What has left over tumbled end over end from the remaining kinetic energy. Gravity soon took over the remnants of the station soon were heading towards its first meeting with the ground.

On the Valiant-Class Superheavy Cruiser, Kilimanjaro, Vice Admiral Darius 'Devastator' O'Neill, watched with glee at the success of the UNSC's first Sovereign-Class Artillery Warship. It was essentially, a mobile Super MAC. With incredibly thin armor to still allow for reasonable mobility and construction costs, the vessel itself was a small test project. A test, which with one shot had just proven its worth. During the battle over Reach, a then unknown Old Covenant warship, later designated a supercruiser, from extreme range, used an immensely powerful energy projector to 'snipe' several ships. Since that battle, the UNSC had started plans to create a sniper vessel of their own.

The result was the Sovereign, the first vessel in both its class and designation. Though the fire rate was incredibly slow compared to orbital based S-MACs, and just slower than those other UNSC warships, it was still a force to be reckoned with. Its range was almost half again as that of an orbital station, but fired a much smaller slug. The Admiral grinned at the carnage the weapon had just wrought upon the aliens. The AI pad glowed and Constantine, the ship's Smart AI appeared, dressed in the customary garb of a Roman Legion Commander. "Well," Constantine began, "I think we sent a message with that."

"Not yet we haven't." The Vice-Admiral was known as one of the most ruthless in the upper circles of the UNSC Navy. His own actions during the Heretic Wars involved chasing down remnants and utterly annihilating them. Yet for all that, there was one other reason why they sent him specifically. He always followed orders. He may be a bit overzealous when it came to destroying his enemies, but, for the most part, he always followed his orders. Barring the rare event where said order was blatantly stupid or suicidal with no reward.

With explicit orders to strike once, then call for surrender, they had sent him. Knowing he would follow his orders to the letter. "Hack their communications, fleet and system wide." When the communication officers gave him the ready he spoke.

"This is the UNSC Battle Group Andromeda. That was your warning shot. Shut down your engines and power down your shields and barriers. This is first and final warning. Surrender immediately or we will open fire."

Back amongst the Krogan defenders, the message from the Vice Admiral had been received in perfect Krogan, having been translated by Constatine as Darius spoke. Faced with an armada the size of which had not been seen since the Rachini wars, and firepower never dreamed of, for the first time in millennia, the Krogan Empire knew fear once again.

Apien Crest: Gemmae System: Planet Aepheus

The planet Aepheus was one of the largest shipyards in Turian space. It possessed a number of berths from which to produce ships. Capable of producing an immense number of ships, equal to that of the current Turian navy, had it the resources, power and personnel to do so, its facilities were more than capable. It was also the only one capable of producing dreadnoughts outside the Turian home system. Making it of great strategic importance to the Turians. The reason why there were dozens of ship in system guarding the planet. More were posted at the Relay but as of a day ago, a good number of ships had been repositioned from the Relay to the shipyards. Due to new intel from the Council of a new, potentially, and likely hostile, race that was capable of FTL travel that was not limited by Mass Relays.

Captain Mallon Vakarian, brother of the Garlon Vakarian, a high ranking C-Sec officer, watched the space around Aepheus with more than a hint of trepidation. Mere days ago the entire galaxy had been told of First Contact with a new species. And what could be only called the idiocy in which it was carried out. Torsk and Arterius. Two names that would, in all likelihood, would live in infamy for a time. Apparently the pair had destroyed one of the alien's, now presumed outdated, dreadnoughts, or least an analogue of one, and summarily laid siege to one of their planets. Then later were sent packing through the Relay. The only survivors had been Turian vessels, no Krogan vessels had returned.

Retaliation was more than likely imminent. They had received much of the same reports as the Krogan Empire had in terms of the alien's capabilities, which was why a large part of the fleet was focused around the planet, and not the Relay. After all, what good was positioning all your forces around a Relay if the enemy didn't even use them?

>He sighed. Perhaps, if he was lucky they would not-Alerts began going off all over the bridge, shaking the captain from his thoughts. "What's going on?"<p>

"Spacial anomalies detected off the starboard bow! Energy readings from scanners match those sent by the Council!"

"All hands to general quarters! Get ready for a fight! And await further orders!" The Captain was certain he couldn't have been the only ship to have detected the anomalies. Looking at the holographic

projections on the bridge, he saw other ships turning towards the anomalies. Those 'disks', for lack of a better term, were like beacons. The moment they appeared, everyone knew you were here. Unlike with Mass Relay travel where, unless someone was monitoring the Relay for power surges and the traveler was using the Relay, it was nearly impossible to detect when someone was coming through.

Meanwhile, the slipspace raptures grew in number and size, totaling at fifteen ruptures. As the last rapture boomed into existence, a ship began to exit from the first. This one, to the Turians, was alien in virtually every shape and form. The Turians had been told to expect ships not unlike the Krogan in design. Blocky, utilitarian, and obviously made for war. What they witnessed coming from the ruptures was anything but.

A bulbous front end emerged from the first portal, its hull a sleek silver rather than a dull black. Its design was something that no race ever designed. In fact it looked like at first glance, an oversized Hanar. As fun as the comparison was, no one was laughing. Especially considering what had come out of those portals. It possessed a slim slick body, with a narrow thin ring attached to the bottom of the ship. When the scanners measured its length based on shared readings from other ships, it was immediately classified as a dreadnought on their scanners.

After the first more exited the portals which snapped shut behind them. The numbers were displayed to every single ship's commanding officer. And it took all they had to not fall to their knees and weep when they had seen the numbers.

Twelve.

Twelve dreadnought-analogues had just appeared in front of them. That amount of fire power was more than enough to decimate the defending fleet, presuming they used mass accelerators. Turians still had their orbital and planetary defenses, a factor they prayed would help them win this battle, if with heavy casualties. "Spirits help us and guide us in this dire hour." The captain had bowed his head as he prayed to the Spirits for power, luck and fortitude to make it through this battle. When he looked back at the tactical display, he realized one portal had yet to close, and this one was bigger than the rest.

Now another vessel had begun to appear from the portal. Its front similar to those that come before, but lacking the ring and dual fins underneath its bow and one other difference. It was MASSIVE. Easily twice the length of the ships that had come before it. When the Turian scanners attempted to classify it, the ship was tagged as an unknown.

Meanwhile, on the CCS-Class battlecruiser The Purity of Spirit, Shipmaster Vas'l Terum watched his fleet and the defenders with his one good eye. A veteran of the Great War, he had earned the injury when a Human child, 'no, a young woman' he corrected himself, had appeared from behind him and fired at him with a stolen Carbine rifle. His shields had been down at the time as he was sent to inspect the troops when they had been sent to purge, no murder, the human population of a planet. He had no need for them. The radioactive isotope round had passed just above his eye, leaving a scar and destroying the eye.

He had immediately torn the young human apart with his bare claws. Since the Great Revelation, what many in the New Covenant called the message of the Oracle, he had worn the scar with pride of the human who had dealt him such an injury, and as penance for his sins against the humans. Since the Revelation, many had scars received on the battlefield removed and lost parts replaced with prosthetics and cybernetics. As a way to forget the crimes they had committed. But many, especially those of fieldmaster ranks and above and refused. Instead choosing to wear the scars as marks of penance, and not bravado.

The Purity of Spirit was his ship from the Great War also, and had served in many battles to aid the humans or in service to them. This assignment was another like it.

When the Alliance had called for volunteers to strike back at an enemy for attacking a human world, he and many others had answered. Vas' was simply the lucky one to be chosen.

His fleet consisted of a dozen, what the humans called SDV-class heavy corvette and his CCS-class battlecruiser. When he had asked why he had been granted such a small and comparatively weak force, especially considering how the corvettes possessed no shields, he was told of the enemy's weaknesses. Their shields could not defend against plasma strikes, at least, they would not hold up to them very well. Along with, their biggest ships possible being the cruisers and were only bigger than his corvettes by a few dozen or so of the human's 'meters'. That said, possibly announcing himself and the ships of his fleet may be enough to force a surrender. If not, he was to destroy the enemy forces that did not surrender, destroy all orbital and planetary stations and take control of the planet's orbit.

And see the meager force in presented to him, he was convinced his leaders had been right. This would be an easy fight. Though he would have preferred to have been accompanied by light-cruisers rather than the frigates. Granted, those ships were smaller but had the advantage of shield generators. The shipmaster signaled towards one of the Unggoy that was manning the communications station to open a comm. line to the defenders. Since the Great War, many strides had occurred regarding the military command structure and the military in general. When the Unggoy confirmed the link the shipmaster spoke.

"This is shipmaster Vas'l Terum of the Fleet of Glorious Fury abroad the cruiser Purity of Spirit. Surrender now or be destroyed." His jaws split into the Sangheili equivalent of a human smile. The shipmaster hoped they would open fire, for perhaps this way; he could repent for all the humans he had killed by fighting their battles with them. And he would not be disappointed.

****Aepheus: UNSC Kilimanjaro: Bridge****

"Constantine, any attempts of them trying to contact us?" Vice Admiral Darius 'Devastator' O'Neill asked. "I'm REALLY hoping you say no."

"Well," the AI gave the Vice Admiral a roguish grin, looking completely out of place on the Roman Legionary Commander. "Today is your day it seems Darius. Detecting energy spikes across all enemy

ships and locations across the planet. Planetary defenses in all likely hood."

Darius turned towards Constantine's avatar. "It still won't save them, no matter how many guns they have." Looking out towards the planet again he started barking out orders. "Have the Sovereign stay here and take out as many targets as she can. Have the frigates Into the Day, Daybreak and Daywalker and Destroyers, Evening's Breathe and Falling Dusk stay back and keep her safe. We have more than enough ships for that. The rest of the fleet minus the carriers fall into their predetermined groups and engage the enemy. Have the carriers trail behind the main groups, launch fighters and bombers at their discretion. No one goes off on their own. Make sure that order is confirmed by all ships."

"Yes milord. All ships have confirmed their orders and formations. Tagging formations as A to E." On the tactical display, nine ships stayed back as the rest moved forward. The remaining thirty five ships divided into five different groups of seven ships, each group a mix of Halcyon(Grade-II) Heavy Cruisers, Montreal-Class Heavy-Frigates and Midway-Class destroyers, one included his own Valiant-Class Super Heavy Cruiser.

The UNSC forces may have been outnumbered here, one hundred ships plus orbital and planetside defenses to their thirty-five, but that number was quickly changing. Each cluster of ships fired en masse as they approached the planet. Taking out, three, four, half a dozen ships at a time, quickly changing the odds, using H-MACs and Archer missiles. The Vadrigos-Class three kilometer long carriers followed closely behind their more heavily armed fellows.

The defending ships attempted to enter FTL, their ships glowing an eerie blue, however, the glow faded and were forced to rely on normal engines to close the distance between them and the UNSC warships. This time, unlike at Shanxi, where the Eezo-based ships were at an angle to or heading towards the planet, the defenders had their backs to the planet, making it incredibly difficult, if not impossible to engage their mass effect drives with their pre-determined equations due to the planet's gravity pulling them back.

Still some managed to engage their FTL drives, instantly closing the distance between them, and the UNSC ships. Forcing the fight to where the UNSC could not use their MACs effectively if at all. It made little difference. The moment the Krogan ships had exited FTL and reappeared near the UNSC vessels, they were destroyed under a hail of autocannon fire. Some were shattered into thousands of pieces, others simply gone from overloading reactors, and a few lucky ones simply gutted through and through. The UNSC ships made their way to the planet, leaving behind a field of dead and broken metal in their wake. The three carriers followed close behind. Deploying fighters and bombers to take care of any enemy fighters and survivors.

"Enemy craft are being routed. Estimated fifty percent of enemy vessels to be destroyed." Constantine reported. Despite the high number of officers on the bridge, most of it was reported to the captain of the ship through the AI usually on any ship due to the sheer amount of information there often was.

"Are any craft attempting to leave the area?" Constantine nodded. On the display, several red dots were highlighted more so as the vessels

they represented attempted to flee. "Redirect the carriers to establish a perimeter around the planet, send one of the attack groups with them. No ships, repeat no ships are to leave the area. Cripple their ships if you have to, just be sure to destroy them later. I want no survivors."

"Orders sent and confirmed received by all ships." On the tacmap, a few of the symbols representing the UNSC ships turned towards the fleeing alien ships. Within seconds of the confirmation of orders received every single enemy vessel attempting to flee was crippled, then summarily destroyed. "Casualties?"

"None. All UNSC ships stayed in formation. Prevented opposition from effectively concentrating fire. Frigates Sephora and Jarden from groups B and E report several blown shield generators."

"Have those groups hang back and search for any stragglers. All carriers stay in position. Have them start taking out those space stations and satellites."

"All remaining ships I want them to start taking their determined positions around the planet."

Following his orders, the remaining ships began to disperse. Taking positions at predetermined positions in orbit above the planet before commencing orbital bombardment with their broadside cannons.

At least, that had been the plan.

Faster than anyone expected, eight slugs streaked from the planet's surface. Eight out of the fifteen Halcyons(Grade-IIs) were rocked by the impact, their shields shattering against the force. Crews were slammed to the floors, walls and their workstations as their vessels were slammed by the rounds. Another ten followed and instantly eight Halcyons(Grade-II) with down shields were speared through and through by the planetary guns. The Kilimanjaro fared little better as his own ship was slammed by two rounds simultaneously. One of them passed clean through and through as the other buried itself inside the superstructure.

"REPORT! WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED!? CONSTATINE!"

Said AI's avatar reappeared on the pedestal having been forcibly shutdown from the impact. "Reading as Mass Accelerator round, same force as one of INF-101s H-MACs. We were damned lucky to have survived it."

"Where the hell did those shots come from! Intel said they didn't have MACs like ours!"

Taking off his 'helmet' Constantine answered. "They don't, least not for their ships. Projectiles sourced from the planet. My guess is a massive planetary gun battery. Several likely. Calculating origin points and transmitting now."

"Have the frigates, destroyers and injured cruisers to pull back outside the range of those guns. Once that's done, slave the firing commands to my station for a single shot. I want each ship to load and aimed at one gun site each. Two for the bigger ones if we can manage it. Once it's done confirm and report to me."

The process took almost an hour to calculate the origins and likely positions then reposition and orient their ships. Once it was done, the Vice Admiral once again lived up to his name. Not even giving The command, he simply pressed the activation key.

With a single button, forty-four ships let loose a typhoon of fire in the form of just under MAC shots. All over the planet, mushroom clouds soon dominated the planet from the sheer kinetic energy striking the planet. Moments after firing, the UNSC ships, now with absolute impunity, began taking positions in orbit at locations across the planet. Each presenting as many of their autocannons towards the planet itself. And again, Vice Admiral Darius 'Devastator' O'Neill truly lived up to his name as he watched with indifference as fire rained on the planet. Tiny specks began to rise from the planet's surface: shuttles, fighters, private craft, all of them trying to flee the planet. Not one would make it. As soon as they were high enough in the air to be seen by autocannons ceased fire, retargeted and shot down the individual craft before returning to their bombardment.

By the time the UNSC vessels had left, nothing over two stories was intact on the planet, and nothing larger than a four-by-four meter plate of steel was still intact.

Just earlier, over the planet of Aepheus, the New Covenant battle group was battling the defenders. No, to battle would mean that it was an even fight. No, it was a slaughter. The heavy-corvette may not have possessed shield generators of its own, but its sheer mass was more than enough protection against these 'Turians'. He had yet to lose one ship and already the enemy fleet was little more than piles of flash-hardened metal.

Shipmaster Vas'l Terum just watched as another ship was wiped from reality by a plasma torpedo. The mass of energized gas disintegrating the ships before it as it traveled its path. His corvettes firing plasma round after plasma round, racking up kill after kill after kill. What few fighters squadrons of Seraphs he had sent out were now, if they were not before, all aces. Eliminating everything from enemy fighters, which were miniscule to the Seraphs, to what the humans labeled as corvettes and even some frigates.

The Turians gave as good as they could but this invasion had long since turned into a one sided slaughter. What was labeled as their cruisers and frigates had laid into corvettes only to receive a plasma broadside for their efforts. Even now the corvettes were finishing off the remaining defenders. A scant few were unmarred but for a few scorch marks and impact craters. Others were heavily damaged, plasma lines ruptured and emergency shielding established to preserve atmosphere. Two were too heavily damaged to serve again once they returned home. They had had their engines shattered to the point where the ship was more valuable as salvage then trying to replace components. Others would need some time in dry dock for repairs. However his own ship, the Purity of Spirit was completely unmarred thanks to its powerful shields. They had scarcely dropped ten percent, if that.

With the enemy defenders destroyed, it was time for the next part of the plan. The reason his ship was here. "Helmsman, order the corvettes to fall back to our current position. Begin moving us over

the shipyards." With confirming nod, the helmsman began to guide the massive, five kilometer vessel in position. Put the orbital shipyards directly under its belly, and consequently, its main plasma battery.

"Shipmaster, we are in position. All batteries are ready to fire. Our corvettes are requesting for further orders."

Vas' sighed internally. He knew what his orders were. Eliminate the fleet, destroy the shipyards, and glass the planet. But he felt, in a word, conflicted. The humans, the True Children of the Gods, were being, he felt, irrational. Their actions being driven by grief and rage. And since the end of the Great War, it was not something we used to seeing in humans any more.

After the Great War, a large part of Humanity simply wanted to drive the Covenant to extinction for their actions, the genocide they had committed. And many of the more zealous believers were more than willing to do if demanded. Yet, it had been not. A great many more, despite all their anger and hatred, were willing to move on and leave the past behind. Somewhat forgiven, but never forgotten.

With the end of the Great War and the Great Purge thereafter, much of the Covenant and their capital, High Charity was in tatters. The station itself had been heavily damaged, and despite the efforts of the Hurgarok, millions would perish from the devastation. Due to decompression, starvation, disease. Those aboard High Charity could not be relocated. Their homes, the closest colonies were far away, and despite their speed, millions would still would have died relocation. Yet, at the Covenant's darkest hour, despite all the wrongs it had committed against Humanity, when the Covenant cried for help. Humanity answered. They provided the locations of worlds, garden worlds, humanity had long since left behind for richer worlds, but these few saved the population abroad High Charity. The act of mercy and kindness astounded all of the Covenant, and despite tense relations due to old feelings from the Great War, the two share a polite relation.

Now, regarding the orders of the Humans, it felt wrong. This can not be allowed to pass, or humanity will poison itself with regret for many years like the Covenant.

The helmsman asked a question, shaking Vas' from his thoughts. "Shipmaster, what are your orders sir?"

Vas' steeled himself. Knowing he would pay the price for his actions later on. But at the very least, humanity will not regret what could have been. "Charge up energy projectors and plasma lines. Crisscross pattern of fire across the shipyards. Leaving nothing standing. Send the corvettes towards the planet. Target their communications stations. Surgical strikes only. Once they are completed, have them return to their positions and prepare for slipspace entry."

"But shipmaster! What of the Humans! They ordered us to purify the planet!"

"I know. But we will not!" Vas' slammed a fist into a the command chair's armrests. "The humans are currently driven by their rage and their grief. They desire what we did when we first fought them so many years ago. I refuse to allow the Humans to become what we once

were! Genocidal demons who slaughtered all in their path for a chance at glory or revenge!" Calming himself, he continued. "We must remind them of the mercy they once showed us. And pray that they remember that they are not the Covenant of Old." As Vas' finished his pseudo-speech, not one sentient being commented or decried his actions. The helmsman simply relayed the orders and began issuing firing commands.

Within moments, lances of burning white energy and plasma beams began to cut into the orbital structures. Cutting through clean as a heated blade through grease. The cut edges white hot from the energy for a single moment before being flash-cooled by the vacuum of space. Great rifts and cuts began to appear. Large sections began to float away, cut free, or simply gone. Lost from the heat and energy poured into the metal. Across the planet, corvettes fired a single plasma round before heading back towards the Purity. Their targets, once structures capable of sending and receiving messages from the void, were turned into puddles of molten rock and metal.

As the last of the shipyards were destroyed, the Purity of Spirit and its escorts left the system.

The jobs of the warriors was done for now.

It was the politicians' turn now.

Current Time: Citadel

Presidium: Council Chambers

"You want us to what!" The Turian Councilor yelled, not believing what this, upstart just demanded of him and his people.

Udina simply stared back at the councilor. The Ambassador understood every word being said thanks to the updated translation package uploaded to his neural link. When the Turians and Krogan had invaded Shanxi, an AI from De La Rosa's battlegroup had managed to hack into their ship's systems. The AI had not assisted with the battle, taking whatever technical and other data they can. The only things they left behind were communications and personal information. Languages, tech designs and something called a Codex was taken by the UNSC AIs. That same data was what allowed the UNSC Ambassador, flanked by a four-man ODS1 squad to understand the aliens. When he spoke, the neural link assisted him in converting his words into the main Turian language, through his vocal implant. Vocal implants were standard implants among all UNSC/UEG personnel who had to deal with non-humans on a constant basis, allowing them to 'speak' in a different species' primary language.

Now here he was, 'negotiating' with the 'Citadel Council'. It took all Udina had not to sneer at the four standing on the platform above him. These four were like the Prophets or San'Shyum they had read about in the History of the Old Covenant, or the brutal monarchies of old from Earth, or even corrupt colonial governments.

Four individuals with more power than was right, and virtually nothing to stop them from exercising it however they wished. At least, that was how it appeared to Humanity. The Alliance leaders already knew what was to happen. They would demand reparations to the fullest extent or they would take it. Granted they would try to play

nice but knowing the fact that they, both Humanity and Covenant would be seen as little more than 'Children', by a collective of species whose oldest members have been traveling the stars for over three millennia. They would not allow themselves to be played.

Clearing his throat, Udina spoke. "You heard me Councilors. We want total reparations in material for the damages incurred by your species for the attack on our colony. And we want those who were present in the attack to be handed over to us to stand trial for various war crimes."

"And what of your attacks on our worlds?" Wrex demanded. "Are we supposed to just take the damage you inflicted upon us?"

Udina resisted the urge to smirk as he answered, "Those attacks were something that were beyond our control. Separatist factions exist in our society, and upon hearing of the attack our colony, took it upon themselves to take retribution." The ambassador was lying through his teeth but they didn't know that. It was true that the Insurrection was still alive albeit a mortally wounded beast but it still existed, and the Remnants were indeed still around. This new strategy was one he had created with members of HIGHCOM just as he was leaving the Kanchenjunga. "We apologize for the lives your people have lost but we will render what aid we can to rebuild what has been lost at the very least." And if this Council accepted their terms, the Alliance would hold their end of the bargain. The damage they had wrought was simple enough to replace, they could do it in the span of months thanks to various factors such as the Hurgarok and a few Forerunner technologies.

Rage appeared clear as day on Teranus's, the Turian Councilor's face. "How dare yo-" But he was stopped when Tevos raised her hand, interrupting him. When he turned to face her, Tevos gave him a withering glare, cowing the much younger Turian. Turning her attention back to Udina she spoke. "Ambassador, please understand. What you are asking us, is far too much to give. We can, over time, perhaps give reparations for the material damage done to your colony." She paused, taking a breath. "However, asking us to hand over our people, even if it is to stand trial for war crimes. We simply cannot do that."

"Then I am afraid we have reached an impasse." Udina said while giving a slight nod. "Our people cry for blood Councilors, everyone is. Your commanders have destroyed what was the beginning of a new era of peace and prosperity after decades of war. No generation exists that does not desire war. At the very least give us your commander. All the Krogan who invaded our world are dead. Now we desire the one who brought your people in the first place at the very least."

Tevos sighed, lowering her head. In all her life, never before had she to endure something like this. A new species who's even rogue factions possessed firepower and technology far and beyond anything in existence. Rivaling or perhaps surpassing the Asari, and perhaps on some level with the Protheans. The utter devastation left behind at the two planets was proof of that. If the Asari fleet had tried to same attack to the same effect, they would have won, but would have lost a great deal of their standing navy. Looking towards Teranus she spoke in a tired voice. "Teranus, you must-"

"No!" Slashing the air with his talons. "The Turians Hierachry will not be cowed by these, these CHILDREN! We will not-what?" Teranus was interrupted from his rant by the sound of raucous laughter. Its source, the five humans in the Chamber, the loudest among them was the ambassador himself.

Calming himself, the ambassador made a show of wiping a tear from his eye. "Oh, ho. It's been a while since I laughed like that." Return to a more professional posture, he directed his words to anyone listening. Civilians had been allowed in the chamber, and it was even more packed thanks to news of a 'new species that beat down the Turian and Krogan.' "Humanity, are indeed, as you say 'children' when compared to you, perhaps. After all we have only been a space faring civilization for a few centuries. However, this is our second ascension."

Of all the people in the Chamber, only the Salarian Councilor, Tevos and few others reacted to the last two words. "S-s-second ascension you said?" Valdn asked. "W-w-what do you mean by that?" He, along with everyone else in the room who knew of the weight of those two words hoped they were wrong.

Udina first cleared his throat before speaking. "This is the second time Humanity has risen from its homeworld and taken to the stars. Taking into account our time during our first ascension, Humanity has traveled the stars for close to three hundred millennia, three hundred thousand years. Our time is barely a drop in that span. Humanity itself as a species was 'birthed' by a species we know only as the Precursors. A race that could literally form entire solar systems and engineer entire species. We were one of two children. Until they were destroyed by our brothers, the Forerunners. Much of our history has been lost, but we know this. Our people once held the power to create entire worlds, literal planets, wherever we so desired. The power of galaxy at our finger tips." It was here the Ambassador paused before he continued. "We don't know how, or why. But some millennia after the fall of the Precursors, Humanity found itself at war with the Forerunners. Already weakened by a conflict history has forgotten, we lost the war. We were devolved to a shadow of our former selves just over a hundred thousand years ago." Look straight at Teranus, Udina's voice held no malice, but pity. "So yes, we are 'children' but we are quickly remembering who we were."

Teranus looked towards his fellow councilors for support. But was met with pity by Tevos, fear by Valdn and indifference from Wrex. Regaining his Turian pride he yelled, "It does not matter what their history is! They are still primitives, and even if they are not, the Hierarchy will prevail."

"With what?" Udina asked. "You need a pack of ships to take down even one of our destroyers, let alone a cruiser."

Many decades after this meeting, when questioned what exactly drove his actions on that day, Teranus will still have no answer. In a fit of rage and arrogance he declared. "Not for long! The Hierarchy has captured one of their ships. We found it orbiting the moons of one of our planets." After the events of Aepheus. The Hierarchy had scattered a large part of its navy not centered in the home system to its holdings. Even planets that had long since been forgotten by all except the maps themselves, planets so insignificant in the eyes of

the Hierarchy, there had not been a ship near some of these planets since their claiming. Around one of the more isolated planets, they had discovered a, then unrecognized alien vessel, the size and tonnage of a dreadnought. Now though, Teranus knew what it was. "The ship we captured is one of your greater warships." At Udina's smirk, he added the killing blow. "An exact copy of the one you came in on."

At those words, the blood of the human's ran cold. The Valiant-Class super-heavy cruiser was a class created during the Great War. Throughout the entire war, every single UNSC ship has been labeled accounted for, bar a few dozen. But there was only one, just one, Valiant-Class cruiser. After critical analysis of the Battle of Psy Serpentsis, The Everest, and all those aboard it, were reclassified as MIA. Cole had been given up for loss but, thisâ€|there were no words. But Udina wasn't a reckless man. Least not normally. With a calm totally opposite of how he truly felt, he asked. "Are you certain that it is one of ours?" His voice cracked at the end, but it was unnoticed by Teranus as he, using the central projector in the chamber, displayed a holo of said ship. And on its side, though slightly scratched by battle and age, could clearly be read. 'Everest'. "And where is this ship now?" In his arrogance, Teranus proudly stated it to be near Palaven. "Councilor, if you value the lives of your life, the lives of your family and people. You will surrender that vessel to the UNSC. Now."

Teranus leaned forward and uttered, "No."

The instant he heard Teranus reponse, he opened a comm. link to the cruiser, and ordered a wide-range broadcast. "To any alliance ship that hears this message. The Everest has been found! I repeat. THE EVEREST HAS BEEN FOUND! ALL SHIPS! MOVE IN ON PALAVEN!" Turning back to the Councilors he gave a second command. "Sapphire team. Take. Take. Take."

Suddenly, the air was filled with the sound of snapping and pops as the cloak fields of a squad of Spartan super-soldiers, II, IIIs and IVs all shutdown, two to a Councilor and three for Wrex and all but one with a MA6-A series rifle aimed at them. Teranus had an M95 shotgun barrel pressed against the back of his head and an MA6-A. The last thing any of them saw was the butt of a gun slammed into their face, or in Wrex's case, three and a fist.

10. UNSC: Returning the Favor

Alternate Past Uncertain Future Mk II

Chapter 10

A Hero's Return, A people's Fury

A/N: Credit to the ProfFartBurger, yes that is his username, for writing the 'package' detonation scene. Go to his page on fanfiction and check out his stories, Hearing the Call, which is one hell of a SI/OC story, and I've read quite a few and possibly one of the best ME AU stories on this site, The First War. Trust me my readers, if you like this story, you will like his.

Unbetaed and unedited. Sorry about that, but I just finished this and

wanted to get this out ASAP. Please alert me to any errors, plot holes, tech errors etc etc, and I will either correct you and tell why that is for my story or thank you and correct me.

Next stories to be updated: New Arrivals V2, Delayed Arrivals and Mass Effect: inFamous The Second Coming in that order.

UNSC Super-heavy Cruiser Kanchenjunga

Trebia System: Home solar system of the Turians

Trebia is considered by the Council and non-Council species as the most heavily fortified and defend system in the Galaxy after the Serpent Nebula.

Least it had been until four hours ago. Now it held a new title: the first Councilor-species homeworld to be held under siege. Four hours ago, slipspace ruptures had begun to tear themselves into existence all over the system. And ships had come bursting from these ruptures, the first were UNSC Hermes-class corvettes. The smallest capital-ship in the UNSC fleet. Within the first hour of the ambassador's message, over two dozen UNSC corvettes had entered the system, some in formation, the others in disarray. And more kept pouring in, all of them scattered throughout the system, some of them at its borders, others in the gravity wells of planets and a rare few appearing directly inside ship formations.

The moment the UNSC ships had entered the system they had opened fire on every target they could see, regardless of their own self-preservation. The day after Shanxi had been liberated by its invaders, the star charts that had been recovered from the alien warships had been distributed to all of UNSC Navy. The moment that every UNSC had heard the message, every ship spent a half minute relaying the message to all within their range before heading with all speed towards the Turian Homeworld of Palaven. Many had scoffed at the foolishness of this new species. Had they possessed something like the UNSC's Cole Protocol it would like have taken them months, if not years to find the Turian's origin system. Now thanks to the folly of the Turians, they were approaching within days after the 'war' began.

The first to arrive were the corvettes of the UNSC and CDF, blazing aside in slipspace past their larger cousins, thanks to their engines, both upgraded to incorporate the latest innovations in slipspace technology given by the Covenant. Within minutes of the corvettes arrival, dozens of turian frigates and cruisers were reduced to burning wrecks and dead hulks of metal as they were destroyed by volley after volley of Archer missiles. L-Type MAC shells were fired by the newer corvettes, slamming into the barriers of the Turian ships, shattering those of smaller warships and peeling away their armor in a blaze of tungsten-magnesium fire, and splattering across the barriers of the cruisers, creating a beautiful display of pyrotechnics. The Turian fleet quickly turned on these new arrivals, their focused fire quickly crippling and outright destroying the thinly armored corvettes, penetrating both shields and hulls, many of those closer to the turian warships self-detonating in an effort to take out as many as them can in martyrdom. At first it had been going well. The number of ships in the turian home fleet meant that their concentrated fire tore through the shields and armor of the corvettes with little issue.

Then it all went to hell.

Unnoticed by either side was a slight shimmer in the darkness of space: a tell-tale sign of an active camouflage system. Its source: the UNSC Apollo-class Prowler, Shattered Light. On board the ship, the entire system and the battles taking place were displayed in the bridge as a real-time 3D holographic projection. "This is madness." Navy Captain Dalia Artmova muttered as she analyzed the images. And indeed it was. The Turian fleet was in complete disarray. Though they were showing concentrated efforts against the UNSC corvettes, many floated dead in space, unsure of what to do. Others began to move in one direction only to shift to a random tangent the next and many more times thereafter.

Perfect.

"Status on our cloak?"

"Board shows all green. All emitters and heat sinks are engaged and in the green. We're cold as space ma'am."

"Status on our nukes? Are the engineers ready with the 'package' yet?"

"Engineer's report 'package' will be prepped in five minutes. Repeat five minutes."

The 'package' had been placed on her ships several days ago and identical 'packages' had been stored on several other Prowlers like hers. She had strict orders not to deploy the 'package' without specific and direct orders from the Alliance highcommand and confirmation codes. Most if not all aboard the Prowlers knew, at the very least, the nature of the 'packages' if not what they were outright.

But once they had heard of the discovery of the Everest being on the Hunter's homeworld, 'the new ones to receive the label, and not the Mglekgolo' she reminded herself. Though after Shanxi, when they had sent fleeing to their mothers with their tails between their legs, some had started giving these new aliens, other, less fearsome names. One that made her, and indeed many others laugh was 'kittybird'. How someone came up with that name she would never know. But damn if it was catching on. Several others were also, but she couldn't remember them.

But that was unimportant, she thought. Remembering the real reason why they had come here. To bring back the greatest hero humanity has ever had and to bring him, and his crew, back home. Many disregarded the fact that he had faked his death at the battle of Psy Serpentis. What they remembered and cared about, was the time Cole had bought humanity with his victories, the lives he had saved, and the hope he had given.

And now it was time for him to come home. And every single human being in the Alliance would be damned if some idiotic second-hand primitives who thought they were the guardians of the galaxy tell them otherwise. "Aires, which one of these worlds is their homeworld?" She paused as another two corvettes, the new 'Pony Express' and the 'Hermes' began flashing red as their engines and

various internal systems began to shut down before they disappeared entirely from the display. Outside, their real-world counterparts detonated in balls of nuclear fire as the crews initiated their self-destructs. The Turian ships had hoped to claim another of the UNSC ships, as the secret of the capture of the 'human' dreadnought, as the Everest was seen by the Turians was now public knowledge. The UNSC crews, in a last act of defiance, would deny the enemy their prize. But this worried the captain; the Hunters were getting coordinated, organized. She couldn't have that. "Mark which world has the greatest military infrastructure after their homeworld."

On the AI platform, an image of a late-era Greek commander wearing periodic armor, Aires, appeared. "It is done milady." On the display, the battle shrunk considerably as two planets were included in the display. "The first is their homeworld of Palaven. Alliance command has ordered that the planet is to remain unharmed at all costs until the arrival of the INFs."

"INFs? As in plural? They finished the sister ships?"

"Confirmed. INFs UNSC Dawn of Man and UNSC Ascendancy are en-route to Palaven." The bridge became deathly silence at the news. "ETA in three hours." Returning back to the display, one of the planets, the fourth in the system was highlighted in red. "This planet possesses the most military infrastructure after Palaven and from my readings, it is also sending out a majority of the broadcast signals to the Hunters' ships. It is most likely their primary planetary command center outside their homeworld."

A feral grin crept across Dalia's face. "Excellent." This gave her a target. If she took out these command centers, then the Hunter armada would be once again in disarray. The increase of subordinates on the homeworld command would ensure that it lasted for a while. Perhaps even long enough for the INFs or at the very least, the cruisers to arrive. "Aires, find us a drop site for the 'package' on that planet." She turned, looking at every single person on the bridge, including the AI. "I understand if anyone here has a quarrel with what I am about to do. What I will order all of you to. Should be tried, I will take the blame. However, do not try and stop me. If any of you truly have issue with what is about to occur, I ask you to leave the bridge and report to your quarters. You will be confined there until we return to an Alliance world." As she finished, she found herself being met with surprise, fear, hesitation, outright anger and finally conviction. As she waited, one stood. A young woman who was in charge of communications. Followed by another, a young man, in charge of one of the sensor stations. Followed by three more men and women. When the five looked towards their fellow crew members, who barely shifted from their stations, they were met with anger and fury. But when they met the eyes of their captain, they found only acceptance. "I understand. This is not an easy decision and I will not hold it against you." The five snapped off perfect salutes before leaving the bridge. "As for the rest of you, I thank you all for standing by me. Now, let us bring peace to the departed."

On the Turian Dreadnought, the Triumphant Spirit, Admiral Canius Garnerin, was enraged. No, he was infuriated. "Damned by the spirits how is this happening! How the hell did these bastards get past our defenses!" His dreadnought shook as the main cannon fired again and again. Each shot striking the frigate-sized 'human' warships. "By the

spirits these 'humans' are idiots. Attacking our home system with frigates. Crewmen, any orders from Impera?" Another 'frigate' cracked and was split in half, bringing the Spirit's kill count up to five.

"Yes sir. Orders are being sent to form attack squads and destroy the 'human' vessels as they appear. Sir I-wait one sir." After an extended pause, before Canius could demand what was being said, the crewman shouted. "SIR! Impera command reports they've detected a stealth ship leaving the planet, radiological emissions being detected from the planet and the ship!"

Back on the Prowler, Dalia cursed as one of the officers in charge of the stealth systems reported they had been compromised. Apparently one of the Hornet-class nuclear mines had a cracked casing, causing radiation to leak out. They had dumped it along with the 'package' but the damage was done. Their stealth was rendered moot as the radiation on the hull made them a clear target on anyone's sensors. "Helmsman! Full speed! Get us away from the planet ASAP! Aires, tell me once we reach minimum safe distance for detonation. Drop the damn cloak if you have to! Nav, get a slipspace coordinate set prepped, Cole Protocol! Someone tell engineering to get ready to jump-heat the slipspace drive! "

Back on the Triumphant Spirit, they and many other Turians watched, their mouths agape as they saw a ship, angular and shaped like nothing they had seen before appear in a shattering of hexagonal pattern. "Spirits, active camouflage. Just who are these people?" Canius whispered before he remembered where he was. "Plot an intercept course! I want that ship crippled and in our possession before we even reach it!" With those orders the Triumphant's engines flared a bright white as it was pushed to its limits in an effort to pursue and capture the 'human' stealth ship. In the Admiral's mind, he had become focused solely on the 'human' ship and its capabilities. And it's potential in the Hierarchy's possession. 'If we capture that ship, Turian military dominance will be secured for decades if not centuries.' It would be his last act as captain of the Turian dreadnought, Triumphant Spirit.

In the blink of an eye, the surface of Impera was changed forever. A micro-star was birthed for an instant, and with it nuclear fire bathed the planet. With an ear-shattering roar, the Shattered Light's NOVA Bomb detonated.

The NOVA Bomb was, in essence, the single strongest explosive known to mankind. It contained nine fusion warheads, contained within lithium tritride armor. Upon detonation, the shell focused the blast, in upon itself, thus multiplying its explosive magnitude and raw power, a hundredfold. The UNSC had only ever once purposely deployed the NOVA Bomb, and the resultant explosion had resulted in the end of the second insurrection before it began. The first true detonation of the NOVAs was in orbit of the planet Joyous Exultation, incinerated a Covenant fleet, shattered a nearby moon, burned half of a planet, and bathed the rest of the planet in so much radiation, that it was forever rendered inert, and unable to sustain Human or Covenant life; the only other equivalent to the Nova's Power, was the Covenant's process of Planet Glassing, which, unlike the NOVA, had been used on hundreds of human worlds during the course of the Human-Covenant war.

The NOVA's power had become the stuff of legend, in the UNSC, and it had quickly gained the nickname 'The Planet Killer'. When the Shattered Light's NOVA had detonated, it truly lived up to its nickname.

The shockwave could be seen through the vacuum of space, as it almost literally parted Impera's atmosphere, as it raced towards its surface. The Planet itself could be seen shaking, not even a moment after the shockwave slammed into it. Enormous fissures and cracks in the ground began forming as the planet literally started to shake itself apart. But the damage being wreaked by the NOVA didn't end there; the heat wave - traveling only slightly slower than the shockwave - quickly expanded, and one could literally see the progress it made, as it traveled across the planet. The heat wave literally turned the surface of the planet black as it traveled across. The planet continued shaking and burning, and as the fireball from the nuclear explosion reached the planet's gaseous atmosphere, was when the real 'beautiful' part occurred.

In future generations, many would comment on the horrifying beauty, of a planet's atmosphere being set ablaze, but to those who were in the battle, as the Human bomb detonated, it was the single most horrifying thing they could witness. The atmosphere was literally being lit ablaze, the blue-white flames leading the white-orange inferno as the atmosphere cooked the planet it was encircling. For an entire sixty three seconds, the planet's atmosphere cooked and burned, as the planet within it shook and fractured. After a final two minutes passed, the planet couldn't take it anymore.

The planet finally shook itself apart, breaking into dozens of enormous pieces, and soaring away, through the void of space. The burning atmosphere almost immediately fizzled out of existence as the continent-sized chunks of planet flew away from its old position. The molten materials from the planet's core seemed to be its last vestige of existence, but that too ended up being defeated by the NOVA, as they flew away from their original position and began cooling in the vacuum of space.

Even the ship near the NOVA, the Triumphant Spirit, couldn't escape the bomb's wrath, the heat wave incinerated the crew inside, and the metal of the ship was literally rendered bright red as the heat wave passed over it. The engine overheated almost as soon as the wave passed over it, and just a moment later it exploded, tearing the ship apart.

The Shattered Light escaped with a whisper into the protective void of slipspace, forward into the realms of immortality and history.

Back on the Citadel, Galactic Society had already once been upheaved by the arrival of humanity and what they had done at Aepheus and Mantun. But this, this was unprecedented in the entirety of their history.

The four Councilors, who were some of, if not arguably the most powerful people in Galactic Society, had just been taken hostage. Spartan Squad Sapphire, ODSF squad Hades and Ambassador Udina had since escorted the four from the Council chambers and were on-route back to the Kanchenjunga.

Least that had been the plan.

Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan-II Isaac-039 ducked as his shields were drained to a quarter as it took damage from at least three dozen automatic weapons. "God damn it! Where the hell did all these bastards come from!" Reloading his MA6-C series Assault rifle before popping off and letting off several bursts, each taking down another of the airborne 'cars'.

Ensign Spartan-III Mark-G258 fired off a triple tap from his M400 Designated Marksman Rifle, the depleted uranium, armor-piercing, linear-accelerated rounds literally cutting off the heads of three aliens with each shot. "This is their 'Citadel' dummkopf. I think we can expect a massive police force here." He shot off another triple tap, earning three more kills. "Sir." He added an afterthought.

"Either way, we need to get out of here." Commander Spartan-III A259 looked from the pair and at his commanding officer. "Our orders sir?"

Captain Spartan-II John-117 examined what became a battlefield moments after they had left the elevator to the Council chambers. Evidently, these 'Councilors' had something tied to their bio-signs and someone recognized when the four had been knocked unconscious and raised the alarm. Leading to what was called the 'Presidium' into a warzone. Literally hundreds of what they assumed to be law enforcement had swooped into the area.

They were of little issue. Their weapons could not penetrate the Spartan's shields without massed fire and even then, they still had a difficult time penetrating the armor itself. The ODS's own shield generators and BDUs meant the same for them however it took considerably less than it took take down a Spartan's shields than an ODS's. They had rightfully assumed their armor and shields could easily stand up to whatever these 'Council races' small arms they possessed. Something they had all noticed was that, of all of those who had come to stop them, they had yet to see any of those that had attacked Shanxi.

But they had gotten careless, forgetting about the one human member of their party who was without armor. Udina. The Citadel forces had opened fire on the group while they had been out in the open, traversing the area. As the massed fire had drained the shields of several of the Spartans before they could take down several of the airborne vehicles several of the aliens were firing from. Isaac now had a cracked visor from a high-power rifle shot and Udina had been struck by a round that had ricocheted off a Spartan's armor. They had patched him up with bio-foam and synth-flesh patch but if they didn't get back to the Kanchenjunga, the ambassador was going to die. The round itself, if not being acting similar to a hollow-point wasn't bad enough: flattening on impact and tearing through ambassador's insides, the bullet itself was slowly poisoning him. A nanite-inject had slowed the poisoning but it hadn't stopped it. To make matters worse was that three of his Spartans and all of the ODS's were out-of-action because they were forced to carry the unconscious Councilors. It had been agreed that having several of their party out of action being forced to carry them was a far better option than constantly worrying that the hostages, each who had at least a quarter of their lifetime if not more in combat and

special-operations would take them down from behind and thus constantly forced to watch them.

"We need to move now. The Councilor is bleeding out and the Kanchenjunga had to call in the contingency." The contingency had been the UNSC Era of Retaliation, six Halcyon(Grade-II) Heavy-Cruisers and three UNSC operated CAS-Class Covenant Assault Carriers; the ships were just a few of the ships that had been gifted to them by the Covenant in the early months after the Heretic Wars as reparations for the war and as thanks. "The fleet doesn't have a problem but they want us there before they have to start shooting civilians. Kalimya, what's the fastest way out of here?"

"I've hacked into their systems and plotted the several paths back to the Kanchenjunga." Kalimya was the 'Smart' AI that had been tasked to John after the Heretic Wars, her younger 'sister' Cortana having been assigned temporarily to the Era for the Op. "Several require us to traverse enemy-held territory. I suspect we'll expend more than eighty percent of our munitions fight through. Others will take longer but we will encounter less enemy resistance."

"And the best route?" He asked. Kalimya had a little quirk she shared with Cortana. When asked to provide a solution, they usually provided several, the first few being ridiculous or difficult. While holding back the simplest and often best, solution.

"We request a pelican flight to our position. Provided they have an escort and are cleared a path, the Era can have a Pelican en route with an ETA of ten minutes from departure from the Era. Total estimated time to extraction as thirty minutes."

"Do it. For the rest of you," turning towards the others, "let's move to that area. We're going to hold on here until evac arrives. Make your shots count."

A chorus "Sir!" answered back.

"Captain!" He recognized the voice, Commander Spartan-II Fred-104. His 2IC. "We got incoming!" Looking towards where Fred was pointing, he was Hunter, or rather Turian dropships.

"Get the ambassador and the HVTs inside that structure now! Spartans, take them down!"

Soon the air was filled with the sound of weapons fire. The bullets themselves didn't do much against the dropships themselves, but forced them away to find a safer landing zone lest their passengers be slaughtered the moment the doors open. Ensuring that the humans and their 'cargo' were safe as they transferred.

The doors themselves offered no resistance as they piled in. "Kalimya, jam the door behind us."

The doors closed and with a series of clanks, the doors locked. "Done. Only heavy-duty gear could cut through that now."

"Good, now we-

"Excuse me, but may I ask who you are?" Faster than anyone expected, almost a dozen rifles were aimed at the single figure who greeted the

Spartans, an asari, who surprisingly showed no fear at so many weapons being aimed at her. "I'm sorry for startling you. But can you please lower your weapons. As long as you are here, no one inside will harm you."

John stepped forward, lowering his rifle and signaling the others to do the same, but kept their rifles pointed in the asari's general direction. "Who are you? And what is this place?"

"My name is Neliana, and these are the chambers of the Consort."

"Consort?" One of the ODS'Ts yelled. "You saying we're in some sort of whorehouse? Damn I-OFH!" The ODS'T found himself flying backwards into his fellow ODS'Ts, causing them to pile up in mess of limbs and bodies. By the time the rifles were reraised on Neliana, the biotic glow was already fading and she was bowing at the hip.

"My apologies, I, nor anyone else here will offer any resistance but please refrain from speaking ill of the Consort. We-One moment please." She pressed a hand against the side of her head. "Yes Milady. Very well milady." Turning her attention back to the humans who were still aiming their rifles at her, she focused on John specifically. "The Consort wishes to meet with you sir. I promise that for as long as you and your friends stay here, you will not be harmed."

Switching off his external speakers, John asked, "Kaliyma, tell me what you know of this 'Consort'. Can we trust her?"

"Searching. I think we can. The Consort has quite the reputation here, as many things. As both a 'comforter' and as an advisor. She's gained quite the reputation as a person of her word and of great wisdom and insight. We can trust her Sir."

"Understood." Turning on the team comm. including the ODS'Ts and Udina, "Listen up. I'm going to see this 'Consort'. The rest of you stay here, keep an eye on the VIP and HVTs." Before any of them could protest he added, "That's an order." Turning back on his external speakers, he turned back to Neliana. "Take me to her."

Bowing again she said, "Follow me please." The rest of the team, though uneasy, stayed as they watched their commander walk towards what may very well be a trap.

Passing by what was obviously a waiting room, aside from other asari dressed similarly to Neliana, the place was empty. Soon John found himself in a more opulently designed room and a single asari waiting inside, her back to him. "Thank you Neliana, you may leave now."

Neliana bowed. "You're welcome milady." Leaving soon after.

"Who are you?" John asked. He had since replaced his rifle on his back but his hands still rested on the two M9 caseless munitions firing SMGs on his hips. "Why give us amnesty? Why did you ask for my presence?"

"In order, my dear soldier." Turning to face John who, despite what his augmentations had done to his sex drive, pelt a tang of desire

upon seeing her. "My name is Shai'ra, the Consort as many of come to call me. The reason I offered protection for you and your fellows is for you alone. As for why I asked for your presence, there is something about you that compelled me to meet with you."

"For what purpose? If this is a delaying tactic it will not work. Make no mistake, my team and I will be leaving with the targets."

"You misunderstand me. I have no intention of attempting to stop any of you. I have no desire to see myself or any of my girls dead." Stepping towards the Spartan Captain she attempted to place a hand on him, being stopped just shy of his armor by shields. "There is something about you soldier. The path that you have taken, it is one far different than that fate had ordained. A destiny forgotten, a legacy gone. And yet, fate has not yet finished playing its hand. Be wary soldier. For the trials you have faced, will pale in comparison of what is to come. The Legacy that you carry within, the culmination of your people, will be your key to victory."

"What are you-"His radio crackled, the signature telling him it was Fred. "Go Fred."

"Sir, extraction has arrived."

"Understood, on my way." Turning his attention back to the Consort, she had already stepped away.

"Go soldier. I have a feeling this meeting will not be our last."

With that she turned around, and the Spartan hesitated a split second before doing the same.

The moment they boarded the Pelicans, they had made a beeline to the cruiser, surrounded by the imposing masses of the UNSC warships, the UNSC operated Assault-carriers been long since repainted gunmetal grey to differentiate it from New Covenant ships. The moment the pelicans had boarded the Era, slipspace ruptures emerged and the UNSC vessels were soon engulfed in chaotic energies as they left the Citadel and moved with all haste towards Palaven.

Back in Turian's origin system, the tide had begun to turn as the UNSC's and CDF's frigates and destroyers began to arrive and began to tear into the Turian Home Fleet's ranks with the MAC cannons and Archer missiles. Turian frigates and cruisers numbers dropped under the barrage, even as disorganized as the human warships were, appearing randomly much like the corvettes that had arrived before them, humanity's experience in the theater of war began to shine. For every one ship the humans lost with the arrival of the frigates and destroyers, the Turians lost ten.

Alongside the UNSC and CDF ships other vessels of obvious human design began to appear: private vessels, civilians, both private military and any civilian ship ranging from private craft to cargo haulers began to appear in the Turian's system. The PMC(Private Military Corporation) ships began to open fire alongside their state counterparts. The MAC shots of the private warships aimed at the bow, unlike the solider tungsten-carbide rounds or even tungsten-magnesium rounds of the UNSC and CDF ships, penetrated the barriers and hulls

of the turian ships, tunneling through decks, armor and turians before internal sensors detected the reactor of the ships and detonated. The Archer missiles of the PMCs doing the same as the MAC shots: keying into the strongest energy source and locking on before boring their way to the targets and detonating in such a way to cause a wildcat destabilization of the ships' reactors, destroying them and any others caught in the ball of nuclear fire.

The other unarmed civilian ships, those that could, began to try and recover as many human escape pods they could and return to the safety of the warships whilst many others began to ram their own ships into the turians'. Their relatively slow speed allowing the ships to directly bypass the kinetic barriers and slam directly into the turian ships; a tactic not since seen since the Great War and the Russian battlefields of World War II, where Russian tank drivers would drive their T-34s directly into the German Panzer Vs and VIs, utterly crippling them. Here many of the turian ships buckled under the impacts, some of them bending into a 'V' shape, others violently detonating as both ships reactors destabilized and detonated, and a scarce few human ships simply tunneled through and through the comparatively lightly armored turian warships.

Many of the turians balked at the face of such an attack. Especially High Admiral Casern Victurs. They had prepared for the worst: an invasion of their homesystem. But not by an enemy that could appear wherever they wished, or the constant stream now quickly turning into a flood of enemy reinforcements, but what shocked them the most was what were obviously civilian ships. Yes the Admiral realized, most if not all turian civilians were trained in the art of combat and were expected to defend their homes should the worst come to pass but not like this. Not what the humans were doing. Actively risking their own lives to rescue who they could from the field of battle, many civilian craft had been and were currently being destroyed as they attempted to save their fellow man but not even to direct attacks but errant strikes. "Spirits just what is this ship to these people?" He had to wonder just what or rather who aboard the human ship they had discovered was to these people that even the civilians would willfully crash their ships in an effort to save them. "Damn it Arterius just what sorts of beast have you awaken? And damn you Teranus, what have you done to enrage them?" Turning to one of his orders he ordered, "Get on the horn, tell as many ships as you can reach to consolidate around Palaven! Tell them this is an order from the High Admiral! Have every ship relay the message however far they can, we need to reach outside the system! Helmsman get us moving!" Despite appearances, Victus couldn't help the feeling of guilt beginning to pool inside him. His orders essentially abandoned the rest of the turian people on the other worlds inside their origin system to the humans. That guilt would follow him and likely his family for a long, long time. "May the spirits, my ancestors and my descendants forgive me."

****APUFMKII****

Onboard the UNSC Era of Retaliation, the four Councilors were beginning to wake up. Wrex, despite having taken triple the force of what his other Councilors had taken, was the first to rise. "Damn, what in the name of Kalros were those things? Sure wasn't some pyjaks." Looking around, he found himself in an unfamiliar room, the design of it was apparently some sort of holding area as, far as he could see, there was no obvious means of opening the door or a door

to open and one wall was a large window showing the great void. Wrex nearly jumped into a combat stance when he heard a moan, but recognized it as the others regaining consciousness. He himself was already healed but Tevos had a monster of a bruise on her face, and the same with Vald'n. Teranus himself would have more internal bruises than external thanks to his carapace. He kneeled by Tevos, helping her to her feet. "You three going to be alright?"

Even with Wrex's aid, Tevo rose unsteadily to her feet. "Yes, I-" She slipped, just barely bracing herself against a nearby wall, "Yes, I think I will be. Teranus, Vald'n?"

"I will be fine. Vald'n?" Teranus rose, stumbling for a second before standing.

"The same." Vald'n attempted to rise but fell against a wall, bracing his body against it to keep himself up. "Where are we?"

"I think, we are on one of their ships," Tevos looked around the room, searching for a means of escape. "For now, it is probably best to remain put."

"Stay put! Are you mad! We must try and leave before-AGH!" Teranus found himself pressed a full head above the floor as Wrex grabbed the Turian by the throat and slammed him into the wall.

"And do what! DIE in a blaze of glory! Take this ship for our own? I may be Krogan, but I know my limits, and I will not die for your goals." Letting him go, Wrex stepped back, "We do as Tevos says, and wait."

They would not have to wait long as soon, as a door revealed itself when it opened and inside stepped in one of the behemoths that had knocked them out. "Lord Hood wants to see you on the bridge." It said, moving its rifle to direct them out the door. The four did as they were ordered and were surprised when they were not restrained in any way. Outside was a total of twenty-four of the giant warriors, each with different armor configurations and weapons. The same one that had entered the room first spoke. "We have been told to treat you as diplomats but should you try to fight or escape, we have granted permission to use anything up to lethal force to stop you. Now please follow me." With the number of weapons aimed at them, none of the Councilors had any notions of resisting.

Standing proud as they walked, Vald'n asked his fellow councilors, "'Lord' Hood? Do you possibly believe they are some sort of monarchy?"

"Possibly," Tevos answered. "But I do not think so. If that was the case the ships would be more ornate I would think, and we have yet to see anything like the sort."

"Agreed." Wrex stared analytically at one of the troopers, a female most likely if the narrower hips were anything to go by, more especially it's armor. "If anything I'm reminded of my own people. Everything here is designed for war and survival. See the random plates on the floor? The ones with a yellow outline?"

"Yes, what about them?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if those things were meant to pop up and create cover if a boarding party came onboard."

Teranus, despite the situation they were currently in, couldn't help but admire these humans, especially after what Wrex said. "I agree with him. Used properly, cover in those locations would serve as a great aid in repelling boarding parties."

"I hope that this is only a sign of their capabilities, and not their species' demeanor." Tevos prayed. The others agreed, if this turned into another Rachini war, the galaxy as they know it would be shattered.

Soon enough they found themselves on what was obviously the bridge of the vessel they were on if the number of stations, officers, tactical display table and the massive window, showing streaks of light and energy in front of them was any indicator. Despite everything going on around them, the councilors' attention was fixed on the man standing at the front of the bridge, standing at parade rest with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Greetings Councilors. I am Rear Admiral Jesse De La Rosa, and you are onboard the UNSC INF-101-series class dreadnought. And the reason I brought you up here Councilors is for one reason and one reason only, so that you know that from this point on, everything that happens, and every one that dies will be on your heads."

Teranus stepped forward, "What do you mean by that?"

"Simply look." In front of the window, the realms of slipspace faded away and the UNSC Era of Retaliation entered, to Teranus, a familiar system. "Welcome home Councilor."

11. UNSC: PlanetFall

Alternate Past Uncertain Future MK II

A/N: A lot of ragging on the turians happens here, partially demonizing the UNSC but honestly, it's just adding realism. For those of you expecting this entire story to be the UNSC beating down on the Citadel, it's not. The UNSC and the New Covenant will face great adversaries as the story goes on. After all, the big dog can't always stay on top.

Someone's got to shake the mountain.

Btw, sorry about the poor quality. This one is bad chapter for me. Expect lots of edits to happen. And I think I'll be going back and putting a lot more detail in the older chapters. Yes yes I know, this is taking forever as it is. But I've been bumrushing this for a while and have to be careful not to turn this story into a Mary Sue.

A/N: 2/25/2014 Sorry for the lateness of the chapter. But I've been hitting so many brick walls with this and trying to avoid going all Mary Sue. But I'll have to work on that on a later chapter. And also, I have been working on several other stories also, please check them out, read and review if you like them. This chapter is far below quality and length wise. A mere 5k words. I'll do better on the next

chapter. Until then, please review. And those of you who have pointed out many faults in prior chapters, thanks. I will be going back on them and this and adding details to correct them. If there are any errors here, aside from grammar, please PM me them. Thank you. And sorry again.

Chapter 11

Palaven

Homeworld Capital:

Cipritine

Turian Military High Command: Command Center

Inside the hardened bunker located several levels below ground, communications officers read back frantic reports coming from surface from fronts all across Palaven. The news was the same across all fronts: they were losing. Badly.

In charge of it all were Primarch Fedeorian and General Victus, the only two members in the chain-of-succession to have made it to the fortified bunker. All others had been outside the capital once the invasion had begun. Some on the planet itself, others on the moon. From their last reports, General Corinthus was in charge of Lunae operations, though how long that would last was anyone's guess.

"By the spirits, just what is going up there!? Can't someone get me a clearer picture of what's going on?" The Primarch was furious. He prided himself in trying to maintain the standard that all of his predecessors had established and maintained during their times as being the best possible leader for the Turian people.

"Anyone!?"

"Sorry sir," General Victus answered, the turian was just as infuriated as his commander-in-chief, "we haven't gotten any intelligence other than the invaders have been sweeping aside our defenses wherever they are, barring locations where heavy armor and air-support are available, and even then, with heavy losses."

"Do we at the very least have set lines? Can we fortify certain locations?"

"It wouldn't do any good sir. From what reports we've received, the enemy is deploying heavy armor from, and I am still unsure how true this is but, medium-to-low orbit." The general shook his head in disbelief. "Sir, I am inclined to believe that these, hoomns, " he strained to say the unfamiliar word, " are using hallucinogenic weapons against us."

"Perhaps but-" The Primarch was interrupted as sirens began blaring inside the command center. "What's going on!"

"Sir, surface reports enemy armor has landed inside the capital! Fifteen units! They're, Spirits, they're being slaughtered!" The communications officer yelled in a panic, the beginnings of hysteria starting to etch on his face. It was a reaction mirrored by many of the officers inside. Cipritine was known for having the elite of the Turian military forces, ranging from the legendary Judicator

Sentinels of the Ninth Division, to the reserves of the Armiger Legion and of course, the Legendary First Company: the first organized military company in Palaven's history since becoming a space-faring species, and the only company to have participated in every major battle of every conflict since. There were rumors of Cabals being stationed here as well. For forces such as those to be slaughtered, it was a terrifying notion.

"Control yourselves!" The growing hysteria was shattered at the Primarch's yell. "Are you not Turians! If the enemy are at our doors, then the next action is obvious: arm yourselves and prepare to fight!" With the obvious orders, any and all non-essential personal left the room and sprinted for the armories, for whatever good they may do. "May the Ancestors forgive me for sending these men and women to their graves."

****Five hours earlier****

****UNSC Halcyon(Grade-II, H-type) Cruiser: Shatter the Sky****

****Bridge****

Captain Ashanti Gordovo watched impassively as another alien cruiser-analogy shattered under the force of a three-shot burst of solid tungsten-carbide MAC shells. The battle-tested technology first used by the refit original Halcyon-class cruiser, the Pillar of Autumn. "How many kills does that bring us to?" He asked off hand, idly noticing one of the triangular alien fighters zip past the bridge dogged by two close-support YSS-1000s. The YSS-1000s or 'Sabres' as they were called, had not changed since they're first deployment over Reach during the early part of the Covenant invasion. They're primary role serving as planetary defense and close-support craft.

"Sir, our total kill count is now two cruiser-analogues, four frigate-analogues and twelve corvette-analogues." His Executive office, a Commander Amelia Weston, answered. "Munitions are currently at 68% for all weapons systems, shields are holding at 75%." Like her captain, and most everyone on the bridge, there was little trepidation on the bridge. If anything, it was calm and calculated fury being directed at the aliens. "MAC controls are temporarily offline. That last cruiser somehow disabled the main cannons with its missile battery. Whatever payload it had, it bypassed our shields partly. Our engineers are working on a fix right now sir." Ashanti did not really care, his ship could handle it. Even should they enemy penetrate the shields, the hull would be more than enough protection. They were designed to protect against something like another Halcyon(Grade-II) or an old Covenant Cruiser's main battery. Instead he was watching the holo of the planet before him.

"We located a drop-zone yet?" Another frigate-analogue exploded in a dazzle of pyrotechnics as it fell under the barrage of several forward mounted 88mm autocannons from the Shatter the Sky. "I think our boys and girls would like their turn at these brats." In the eyes of many humans, the turians had become little more than insolent children that needed to be taught their place. That they weren't the biggest guys in the neighborhood. Not anymore.

Next to the captain, a UNSC Smart-AI appeared, garbed in the armor

and robes of a knight of the Third Crusade, a more commonly occurring theme amongst Smart-AIs in UNSC military. This particular AI was based around the persona of King Richards I. "These heathens believe themselves to be superior. I've detected several dozen planetary guns and Anti-air emplacements all over the planet. Along with multiple demands to 'stand down'. However, I recommend our light-cruisers and anything below their weight class to remain clear of the planet." Before the captain could ask, several locations of the planet were highlighted blue, "I've detected several ground-to-space ordinance locations, ranging from planetary mass accelerators to ballistic missiles, which are more than capable to crippling if not outright destroying ships of the types I just stated. Those above will be fine, however we still cannot remain in range long. Sustained fire will be a significant threat."

"Agreed, send the warning to any vessel of light-cruiser tonnage and below inside our range to stay clear of the planet. What about the guns themselves? Anything we can do against them?"

Waving a hand, an image of Palaven appeared on one of the many screens on the bridge, several locations highlighted in green, yellow and red. "I've tagged as many of the planetary defenses as I could. However, from my scans and those I've gained from others in vicinity, the guns are too heavily fortified for anything other than a direct hit by an Infinity class's energy projectors if we were to try and disable them from low-orbit."

Ashanti grimaced. That level of fortification left one option, a ground war. The range of the planetary guns was considerable. And the sheer numbers meant they couldn't get their cruisers directly over a city and simply bombard it. "Find me a dropzone then. It's going to be a ground war."

"Understood sir, informing the ODSTs and ODAs now." The AI disappeared as it went to inform the men and women below.

****Shatter the Sky: Orbital Insertion Preparation deck****

On the preparation deck, hundreds of ODSTs scrambled. Grabbing whatever extra weapons and munitions they desired as they readied themselves and others for drop. Ammo was slotted into packs and the like. Weapons slotted into the securing points inside the pods themselves.

Squad and Platoon leaders were being issued their orders and locations of operations. Each sharing the same objective: search for any information that could pertain the location of the Everest, and thus Preston Cole, extract the Admiral and any other UNSC survivors and get out. Anything else was left to each person's interpretation.

However, that was amongst the infantry.

The ODA's were prepping for combat.

****APUFMKII****

On the ground turian soldiers and armor units were scrambling across the outskirts and inside the city. Anti-air and anti-tank defenses were established. Trenches were dug and barricades were established.

The turians were preparing for the inevitable invasion of their planet by the new species. Many of those on the ground didn't even know why this conflict had arisen. Shouldn't their fleet have eradicated or subjugated these newcomers? How had they managed to penetrate this far into their defenses? What had happened to the colonies? Many other similar questions burned through the minds of many turians as they readied themselves and their defenses.

At one of the barricades established inside the capital, a Turian Cabal, Nyreen Kandros was watching her squad set up a HMG and other weapons emplacements on top of a prefabricated wall that they were using to block off a street. Behind her, several other makeshift tents had been established for munitions and the like. The command center and other important supplies, such as their explosive ordinance had been sequestered away inside the buildings on the street. "C'mon move it! We don't know how long we have before they start trying to drop in!"

One of the soldiers, a young private, grumbled. "I'm a good turian why do we have to listen to the female?"

One of his fellow soldiers slapped his soldier. "Quiet!" He chastised in a hushed whisper. "Don't let her hear you say that! She's a Cabal, meaning she outranks just about everyone in this blasted city except for the commanders!"

The private growled. "I'll do as she says, but I don't like it. Females shouldn't be on the battlefield, they should be back home or in the medical tents. They're totally useless in a fight."

"Oh?" The private twitched at the voice. "Is that what you believe?" Turning, he found himself looking into the polarized visor of his commanding officer. "Well now. Let's see how this-" A boom cracked across the skies, then another. Followed by a third. Everyone looked up to see streaks of fire coming from the skies down towards the city and the outskirts.

Nyreen looked away from the falling fires, and looked to her squad. Seeing them dumbstruck by the falling fires, fired off a round. Drawing their attention back to her. "Move out."

****APUFMKII****

Lieutenant Colonel Hadrian Domnius watched as the altimeter on his HUD decreased at a blistering pace.

Thirty thousand kilometers.

Twenty-five thousand kilometers.

Fifteen thousand. Ten thousand.

The basic AI inside the suit activated as it reached the required distance. "Ejecting drag suit(yes that is suit, not chute). Engaging Thrusters." Harsh shudders rocked his body as the thrusters engaged in an effort to slow his descent to a survivable speed. Grabbing ahold of the controls, he initiated the systems. His HUD flared to life as it went from stand-by to tactical mode. Highlighting anything in the environment he could see, and small dots representing faraway

units. "Calling to all units. Sound off now!"

"Hammer 1-2 ready to bring the pain!"

"Hammer 1-3, jonesing to kick it where it hurts!"

"Hammer 1-4, ready and able."

"Hammer 1-5, Nos a mortuis, mortem ferimus." As each voice sounded off, his HUD tagged each a dropped a marker on each, showing him their positions as they fell.

"Hammer 1-1. All call-signs in." Hadrian switched the Comm. to a general frequency. Letting everyone, both human, and alien. Friendly and enemy, hear his voice. All across the forces dropping down on Palaven's capital city, both falling from the skies and in the drops above them, they all heard. "Listen up! We are dropping in directly in enemy lines! Remember why we are here! We are not here for what they did at Shanxi! We are not here for attacking the UNSC! We are here, for one reason, and one reason only! The Hero and the Great Mountain is on this world! And by Heaven or Hell! Angels or Daemons! We will find them, and we will bring them home! Do you get me!?"

The voice answered as one heart, one mind, one voice, one soul. "WE GET YOU SIR!"

The Colonel himself gritted his teeth and yanked hard on the controls as his altimeter read two thousand meters altitude. The unit shook hard from the G-forces slamming against it. Slowly but surely, the unit rotated one-hundred eighty degrees, before slamming into the Palaven dirt.

Squads of Turian soldiers rushed the, intent on taking out whatever had landed onto their world. Dust obscured everything, the turians held their fire, waiting for whatever would come out of the dust.

Soon the outline of a thing appeared in the dust, before a dark red line lit up in the dust. One of the turians yelled in his native tongue and a tsunami of bullets riddled the thing in the crater. Weapons overheated as the rounds poured onto the thing. Soon the fire stopped as their weapons forced on their safeties to cool, lest the weapons warp and melt from the heat.

Soon the dust cloud settled, and a golden shimmer could be seen. Hexagonal patterns making up its structure. Soon, it disappeared, and the hulk could be seen more clearly. The turians stepped forward, hoping to get a closer look at their target. They never got the chance.

25mm Armor-Piercing, Fin-Stabilized Sabot Shells splattered their bodies into so much paste as the sheer velocity and heat from the Anti-tank rounds riddled their bodies. Shearing them in half at the torso, others were completely disintegrated. Firing at 900 rounds a minute, traveling at two kilometers a second, the autocannon shells showed no mercy.

As the last turian was turned into some much pulped meat, the fire died down.

From the crater a massive mechanical hand grasped the lip of the crater, as the rest of its bulk followed. HRUNTING/YGGDRASIL MARK XII, callsign, Hel, raised itself from the crater. Across and outside the city, similar scenes were happening as dozens of other suits hit the Palaven dirt. Looking up, the Colonel saw more streaks across the sky as more and more units crashing down. "This Colonel Hadrian. Daemon Company is on the ground."

****APUFMKII****

"By the Ancestors! What are these abominations!?" Second Lieutenant Flavus Vakarian slammed down the firing studs of the six-barreled auto-cannon of a crippled Charum Infantry-Fighting Vehicle. The weapons were perfectly fine, but the vehicle would never move again, its treads completely destroyed. The barrel glowed red and slowly turned white as it was pushed above and beyond its normal limits. His target? One of the massive bipedal walkers that had fallen from the skies moments ago and carrying a very large rifle. One that was so massive he doubted anything but those walkers could carry them. And they were closing in on his position. "We need armor! Or a blasted artillery strike! Agh!" He fell off the cannon as a massive round from the alien bipedal walker's rifle skimmed past, slamming into the building behind him. But it traveled with such velocity, it burned the air near Flavus.

"Sir!" A young turian private ran up to him, grabbing him off the floor and to better cover. "Medic! We need a medic over here! And someone get back on that gun!" Though the turian was a mere private, no one questioned his orders as he spoke with an authority not found in one as young as he was. "Sir, are you alright?"

Flavus waved off the private as the medic arrived, carrying a medical hardcase. "Send the medic back, I'm fine. There are others who need actual help. It's just a slight burn. I'll be fine." The medic took a cursory glance at where the round had passed so dangerously close to Vakarian. The helmeted trooper nodded and without a word, ran off. "Someone get me a line to command, we can't hold this position. Not without help." As to punctate his point, the gunner and the turret were vaporized by the enemy mech. The rounds from its rifle shattering the turret and its gunner.

"But sir, command has ordered total radio silence. We are not to contact them under any circumstances." The private protested, even as we watched his fellow turians trying to take on the mechanical abomination ducking for cover behind the thickest material they could find, or scream for a medic as limbs were shot offs and heads taken off.

The pre-fabricated barricade shuddered as another burst of high caliber rounds slammed into it. "Damn them! Then get me a line to the artillery crews! Tell them I want a fire pattern at our position! And I don't care its danger-close or unauthorized! I'll take the fall if I have to! But tell them if they don't open fire on that grid now! Palaven high-command will be lost!" As if to punctate his statement, the barricade finally shattered under the withering fire, peeling apart as the rounds ripped holes in the wall and tore a hole.

At the sight of the ripped open barricade, the private froze up before Flavus slammed a rifle and into the privates hands and pointing in a direction to run. The private ran off, speaking into

his radio as he ran. Flavus got back to his feet and grabbed his sidearm. Marching up to the platform where his troops stood against the defenders, parts of it was slick with blood. Taking cover alongside them, he readied his sidearm. "Stand firm! You are soldiers of Palaven! And this is our world! These aliens think they can come here and take what they want! Destroy our world at their whim! But we will prove them wrong! We are in the right! They have come to take what is rightfully ours! Fight to the last, for we are Palaven's Glory!" A faint whistling was heard from the skies.

On the other side of the platform, the aliens yelled something in their language before scattering. The bipedal walker tried to get out of the clearing but was trapped by the proximity of the buildings. Meaning it had nowhere to go once the barrage began.

The world shook as the artillery barrage shattered the streets. Explosive shells filling the street in debris, shrapnel and fire. The barrage continued for a full half-minute. Thirty seconds of nonstop explosions.

Once the barrage ended, Flavus peeked over the barricade to find a welcoming sight. The mechanical walker had collapsed and was destroyed beyond recognition. Alien bodies, both intact and parts were scattered around the street also, the buildings they had taken refuge in on the verge of becoming piles of rubble.

The troops at the barricade cheered. A battle was won, but Flavus knew this war was far from over.

****APUFMKII****

A squad of HRUNTING/YGGDRASIL MARK XIIIs were walking down a ruined street in the capital city of Palaven. Each one a different variant of the Base variant. One of them with the bright blue and green stripes of a Designated Marksman, carrying a M700-series Semi-Auto Bolt-shot, firing 35mm Depleted Uranium shells. "Sir, I have zero contacts on my sensors. Both passive and active." Inside was Gunnery Sargent Taiba Quara, callsign: Whisper, she was a marksman whose skill was virtually unmatched except by those in the Spartan ranks. Able to acquire, aim and neutralize a target in one fluid motion, and even better in a target rich environment, coining the new phrase, "One mag, thirty kills."

"Same here boss. I can't find any sort of electrical grid besides the basic one. Wherever it's hidden, it pretty well shielded." Another variant, this one a 'Seeker' variant, with yellow markings, carried a pack unlike more of its fellow exosuits. Callsign: Ghoul. Designated as an intelligence gatherer, it was meant to scan, listen, decrypt and locate any sort of electrical signals and communications. The variant was codenamed: Sparks, and its pilot was one Jamie Freloren. One of the best of ONI's field agents, and part of the few that actually went on operations with non-ONI forces. "Damn, this birds got some wicked tech if they block my gear." Her frame carried the standard JX-312 rifle, firing 12mm sabot rounds at 800 rounds a minute.

"I say we just start blowing holes in the road until we find something." The designated Demolition/Support unit, marked by Red, yellow and orange stripes was given a wide berth by the others. Callsign: Tungsten, its pilot one Harden Phillips, his callsign was

for his thickheadedness and belief that "every problem can be solved with the proper amount of explosives." and had a reputation of being quite the pervert, often making lewd, if joking comments about women, which along with kind demeanor, meant he was both hated and loved. His frame was carrying an A-5 seven-barreled 30mm rotary autocannon, with a withering rate-of-fire of fifteen hundred rounds a minute, equal to that of the aptly named MG-42 "Buzzsaw", loaded with explosive rounds. When it fired, it was a continuous roar of death. That in of itself made it a walking WMD. But it also carried the squad's heavy weapons. An AC-41 Multimunition Missile launcher, designed for use against a tank column or a small-capital ship like a corvette, capable to firing a single missile with an internal payload of several 105mm submunition missiles.

"The three of you, shape up!" The Squad leader, Callsign, 'Singer', name: Timura David, was in a 'special' model of the Mk. XII. It was not dissimilar to a 'base' model Mk. XII, for all appearances. Except for one big difference, the oversized 'backpack' it carried and the conduit protruding from it. Singer, as a Mk. XII squad leader, was authorized to carry one of the UNSC's most prized weapons: The second generation GK-3 'Goryeo' beam rifle. A scaled-up design of the Covenant beam rifle, enhanced by human and partially-reverse engineered Forerunner technologies. It was a multi-purpose capable weapon, accurate enough to serve as a sniper rifle, powerful enough to serve in an anti-armor role, or a semi-auto rifle, based on what it was set it for prior to deployment. Battlefield alterations were impossible. Singer's was configured for the anti-armor mode, firing a cohesive beam energy capable of penetrating most material the UNSC had encountered without shields. The conduit from the oversized pack connecting directly from the pack to the weapon itself. "Our objective to clear out as many AA emplacements as we can and clear a path for the dropships."

"Why don't we just fire on this shit from orbit? It's not like they can shoot us out of the sky or something." Tungsten asked. He was jolted forward as he was slapped by Ghoul.

"If you would use that thing between your shoulders for more than trying to guess a woman's cup size, you would know that we can't because we don't know where the Everest is! No one want's to be known as the person that killed Cole."

"Just saying, it's an option."

Ghoul's stopped in front of Tungsten, jabbing his exoskeleton in the chest. "Well maybe you should-" Ghoul never finished what she was saying as explosions rocked the area around them. "What the hell was-" Right as a several metric tons of building fell right on her, her signal completely disappearing from the HUDs of the squad.

Tungsten spun, "Ghoul!" Before any of the squad could try to save their squadmate, they were besieged by all sides. Small arms fire from dozens of rifles, grenades, and several missiles pelted the mech squad, firing down on them from the windows of the buildings around them. Electrical discharges, dark energy orbs and incendiary missiles splashed against the shields, actually shattering them under the barrage and began striking the heavy armor before any of the squad could react. The squad simply braced itself, shielding their 'heads' with their arms or weapons. When the firing and dulled from to a dull

roar, Stinger whipped his beam weapon in a wide arc, "Return Fire!", a deadly beam of violet energy slicing through the buildings, leaving molten metal and rock in its wake.

35mm shells began to slam into the building, causing a tremor with each impact, just before it was joined by a torrent of 30mm explosive shells, vaporizing the buildings as it punched through glass, metal, flesh and bone, choking the air with dust and bloodmist. Tearing the buildings apart, even as Stinger's beam cut large gashes in the buildings around them, leaving angry red scars. Shells clattered around them, digging into the road beneath their feet from their sheer weight. The tidal wave of noise did not stop until Stinger raised a fist. "Cease fire." Even with all the fire around them, thanks to their internal comms, the fire ceased as soon as their squad leader gave the order. As the dust cloud settled, they could see what they had just caused. The buildings that they had been ambushed from were torn down to almost their bare frames. Only fragments of corpses remained. "All clear." Stinger looked towards the pile of rubble, about to order the others to help him dig out Ghoul when he saw it.

Tungsten had already rushed over to where Ghoul had last been, and was frantically trying to clear the rubble. "C'mon Ghoul, don't you dare die on me woman." He muttered. Tungsten was soon joined by the others, who also began clearing away the rubble. "C'mon where are you Ghoul? Answer me." With her suit gone from their HUD, they couldn't tell if she was dead, alive or wounded, and until otherwise they would assume the last.

****APUFMKII****

Several hours ago, moments before arrival of UNSC and CDF corvettes.

While many of Palaven's secret projects were located on the homeworld and other offworld locations, its biggest secrets were stored elsewhere. Specifically within the underground shipyards and docking bays within Palaven's moon of Menae.

The installation was an incredibly old one, created before the turian's arrival on the galactic scene. Commissioned and created prior and during the Unification wars, it was meant to serve as a covert staging area should the Hierarchy ever become involved due to no action of their own. The massive hangars were built underground, to hide whatever ships they desired from prying eyes.

And it was here where the Hierarchy had hidden the UNSC Everest since its finding. The movement of the ship from one of the forgotten claims had not been an easy task. The very size of the vessel made it difficult, requiring a multitude of cruisers, frigates and dreadnoughts working in concert to be able to tow the ship with them and to the nearest mass relay and from there into the hidden hangars.

Even now, with their home system being invaded by the new species, those inside worked tirelessly to uncover the secrets of the ship.

"Damn, just what were these people fighting?" A turian soldier muttered as he walked through the darkened corridors of the ship.

"Blast, another sealed bulkhead." He activated his omnitool and marked the passage before turning back to look for another way. Getting inside the warship had been easy, the hull had so many breaches that it was simply a matter of choosing an entry point. After that though, it became complicated. The scale of the ship meant that hundreds of other soldiers were mapping out the ship by actually walking the corridors. Active and passive scanners had little success in mapping out the corridors, the hull of the ship passively stopping any intrusive scans. Using echolocation to try and map out the inside proved to be fruitless as for whatever reason, the design of the corridors result in the return image being a far cry from the actual design. Hence why they were manually mapping the ship.

As it was, they had barely made any headway. Having only managed to gain access to certain areas of the ship, such as the medical wings of the ship along with the motor pool and what appeared to be a ready room in the bottom of the ship along with other areas and several armories. However they had been barred from entering the reactor core, the bridge and a large area of the ship that, in everyone's eyes, showed no real purpose. The paths to these locations had been blocked by sealed bulkheads. These were left alone after the first team to enter had breached one of these bulkheads only to be eviscerated by a series of automated defenses separate from the rest of the ship.

The soldier stopped as his comm. clicked on. "All troops, report to command immediately! We Palaven under attack by unknown hostiles! I repeat Palaven is under attack by unknowns!" The soldier snarled under his breath before sprinting back the way he came, heading back the way he came and towards the closest exit.

On the bridge, idle stations were dark. Power having left them long ago. All that is, except for a single pedestal, next to the command chair of the bridge. A dull hum began to sound throughout the bridge, slowly growing in tone and volume as long idle stations and machines began to wake once more.

Underneath the light dust that had accumulated accumulated on the stations, screens and displays began to light up once more. Lines began to appear on them, all of them the same.

"UNSC/UEG IFF detected. Unknown callsigns. IFFs confirmed. Executing Amerigo Protocol."

"Reactor status: 15% capacity. Fuel status: 46% Coolant Status: 78%"

"Reactor: Increasing to 45% capacity."

"Armaments status. Primary Armaments: Main Cannon 1: offline, Main Cannon 2 offline. Secondary Cannon: standby. Secondary Armaments: Archer missiles: Depleted. Shiva missiles: Depleted. Tertiary Armament: AAA M190 Helix Defense System: 87%."

"Unknown IFFs presence detected: internal and external."

"Booting up sealed UNSC 'Smart' AI MRN-01/138." The pedestal, which only had a faint glow before, began to glow brighter.

12. UNSC: Arrival(Completed)

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future MKII

Credit for added work to aDarkOne for helping me write this chapter.

Read Author's note at bottom please.

Also, this is a request, could or rather is, anyone willing to create a cover image for my story? This would have to be out of the goodness of your heart,(or wallet) as I am broke and can not pay for services whatsoever. Outside of writing more on this story.

(3/4/2014, as of this posting, this is what I have come up so far since the last post. It is unfinished as it is a meager 1794 words. I will create a full chapter, but I wanted to know what you guys think. Please review and tell me if I still got it.)

(3/21/2014, well guys, here is the full chapter, as of now. Let me know what you think, as per usual.)

Chapter 12

"The road to hell, is often paved with the best of intentions."

UNSC: Revelation

As the UNSC Era of Retaliation punched a hole back into realspace, and granting a view of the turian's home system, Admiral De La Rosa steeled his features before the emotions bubbling under him could run unchecked. What they, that is the bridge crew of the Era, had expected to see when they had entered the system, was a turian fleet that once they had realized the Era had arrived, would enmasse, move towards their position.

What they did not expect to see, was a warzone. The space between worlds was filled with the wrecked and shattered hulls of an untold number of ships. Even without an IFF, it was plain to see many were UNSC and CDF vessels, turian warships and even civilian craft that possessed slipspace capability. Even now, ships still rent holes back into real space, though was a trickle compared the flood earlier. And most, upon sighting the Era, immediately halted.

What seized everyone's attention, least the humans', however was the rapidly growing asteroid field. Most didn't realize what it was, but the Admiral did. He had seen such devastation only once in his entire career, even then, it paled in comparison to the sight before him. What was once a planet completely shattered and broken, with whatever ships that were unfortunate enough to be nearby turned into already cooled streaks of metal from the blast.

Looking briefly behind him, the Admiral noticed how the four Citadel Councilors were in shock, taking in the devastation before them. Taking advantage of the moment, the Admiral. used his neural implant to connect with the ship's AI. 'Mjolnir, please tell me that someone did NOT detonate a NOVA-class nuke here. Please tell me that I am not seeing human ships laying waste to the system.' His neural link translated and sent his thoughts directly to the AI.

'Wish I could Admiral, but radiological readings are comparable to a NOVA detonation, and you know the only other thing that is similiar is-'

'Is a stellar-explosion, yeah I know.' The Admiral fought the urge to grimace. He didn't think that someone would even consider deploying a NOVA, let alone actually detonate it. There weren't even that many ships allowed to carry it, only the Era and her sister ships when they were finished, and maybe a few ONI ships. 'Waitâ€Mjolnir, any signs that a Prowler was here?'

'Checking now. However sir, it seems our 'guests' have a few questions.' As the Admiral turned again, he saw the four Councilors had approached his position, if only to see the devastation even closer. Teranus was the first to speak, "W-w-why? Why have you done this? What in the Spirits happened to Impera?" All but yelling the last.

'Mjolnir, contact every single damn ship in the system, and tell them to get behind the Era, tell them this is Admiral Jesse De la Rosa, and any ship that disobeys will be blasted out of existence. Do it while I handle our 'guests'.' His commands relayed, the Admiral sighed internally, he did not want to do what he was about to do but he decided that to try and make the best of the situation. To turn what was one of the greatest crimes in human history, into the greatest example of just what humanity could do. And if that meant that he needed to play the devil, so be it. Better to play the devil than to be in a war. Without turning to the Councilors he began, "Councilor. Humanity is no stranger to war. We have been annihilating each other on the battlefield for as long as our people have existed. And then we encountered the greatest threat our species had ever encountered. We were soon plunged into a war the likes we have never seen and survived. As a result, war, is something we have become exceedingly efficient at. You simply lack the fortitude for a real war." "

"War!" Wrex, who had surprisingly been the image of calm among the Councilors suddenly was enraged. "What do you know of war! Our society was nearly destroyed when we encountered the Rachini! It took every single thing we had to push them back! My people nearly destroyed ourselves in a nuclear genocide!"

De la Rosa snorted. "Is that all you have faced?" He asked, not even turning away from the viewport as more and more of the Turian Navy was decimated. "How many did you lose in that war? A dozen million? Maybe a couple hundred million? To us, to humanity, that is simply a brush conflict, a small insurrection. One that is ended before it can begin." He turned to glare into Teranus's eyes, the anger behind them boring straight into the Turian's soul, marching up to him and grabbing him by the collar, with an anger that Jesse did not think he had. "We have seen the true face of war. And we did not flinch." He let go of Teranus. "We endured. We adapted. We survived." De la Rosa turned back the window. "You asked what happened to your world turian? The answer is simply, we destroyed it." He bit back his self-disgust as he callously disregarded the destruction of an entire world, but he hoped that this would ensure that humanity would not, if not have enemies, then at least not be in a war again.

The Admiral's words hung in the air as the four processed them, Vald

was the first to regain his voice. "Impossible! Not madness! Why would you have a weapon that cause such destruction, let alone how! No race, no matter how depraved, would have a weapon of such magnitude." The Admiral did not respond, in desperation, Vald'n looked towards the other members of the bridge crew, looking for some validation of his words. That they had no weapon, and never would. What he got were somber faces from the young or hard glares from the old around him. More than a few tears were shed and blood drawn as fists were made. Looking at the Admirals back yet again, he managed to utter, "Impossible."

The Admiral did not bother to turn around, "Is it? I ask again, how many died this Rachini war was you call it? How long did it last?"

"Three hundred years, and we lost over three billion of our people." Teranus responded. De la Rosa's neural link translating the Citadel figures into the Earth solar years, which were surprisingly similar.

"And your worlds? How many were lost?"

"Several dozen, but we eventually reclaimed and resettled them all." Teranus and his fellow Councilors were surprised when the Admiral snorted.

"Is that all? Councilors, you truly do not understand war. From you have told me, your people, the very existence of your species was never truly imperilled. Humanity fought a war against an alliance of aliens, hell-bent on our extermination for one reason and one reason alone: "Your extinction, is the will of the gods. And we, are their instrument." Those were the first words humanity heard as a whole upon first contact, and it would not be the last time we would hear them. Over thirty years, we fought and died in the face of a relentless, unforgiving and merciless enemy. Our worlds burned by the score, their surfaces turned to naught but glass. Tell me, have you ever seen a world be burned by plasma? To see the oceans boil and vaporize, the sand and earth turn to glass, a mirror smooth surface filled by the remains of the dead?" His voice had lowered to a deathly whisper as he remembered the very sights he described, the silence of bridge ensured each word was heard clearly. "Our enemies did not care who or what we were. Man, woman, child, military or civilian, they all burned the same. In their genocide, tens of billions perished. And as we watched, seeing our worlds, our families burn in the face of the enemy, we quickly realized, as someone once said that 'It is an undeniable and may I say fundamental quality of man that when faced with extinction, every alternative is preferable'." Gesturing to the shattered planet he elaborated, "What you see before you, is a weapon created in the wake of such desperation."

Tevos, despite her skin having paled at what she just witnessed and had been told, managed to ask, albeit in a quaking voice, "W-w-what I must ask is, was the war so terrible that you need a weapon of such magnitude to win?"

A sad smile crept across the Supreme Commander's face. "Win? My dear Councilor, we created the NOVA not as a means to win, but as a means to put us on equal terms. For thirty years we lost to our enemies. City by city, fleet by fleet, world by world, for over thirty years.

We sent thousands to their deaths to buy our people more time. Thousands of weapons were designed and deployed so that we might survive. And thousands more willingly made the ultimate sacrifice to buy us time. The NOVA would have given us a fighting chance. A bomb that would have burned the worlds of our enemies, committing the very genocide on them as they had us. To try and force them back in one last desperate gambit. A gambit, that many are grateful for, never came to pass." De la Rosa grabbed Teranus by the collar of his shirt and dragged him to the window. "Your people have made a great mistake, turian." De la Rosa said, lacing the last word with so much venom it was like a curse, anger coming from within that De la Rosa did not know existed. "The man aboard the ship that you hold like some sort of prize is a hero, no, not a hero; he is a symbol to all of my people. A symbol of hope. Of redemption. Of perseverance. Of standing tall in the face of overwhelming odds. And was the hero we needed, but not the one we deserved." His voice dropping to whisper at the end. "So for the sake of your people, tell me where he is. Before my people tear apart your planet to reclaim our hero. And I will do nothing to stop them."

"And your people haven't already! You ordered them to this! What more can you do?"

De la Rosa released Teranus from his grip before whispering, "You are mistaken Councilor. The man you are holding is one of such charisma and a symbol of such power, that the man in the street would gladly lay down his life to see him safely home. Every single ship that you see out there, is here of their own volition. Every single one. They came because they value the life of the man you are holding above their own. And they will not stop until he is found and brought home."

****APUFMKII****

Surface of Palaven

Capital of Cipritine

Turian Command Center

Outside the once-hidden entrance to the command center, the building facade had all but fallen apart from constant tremors, explosives and one of those alien walkers actually barreling through the building as it fell. Luckily, the war machine had not emerged from the rubble, remained buried underneath.

That was a moot point however, as the command center, or the entrance at least, was now under siege. With the loss of the facade, the only thing keeping the command center secured was a series of thick dreadnought-armor grade doors, each several layers thick. And the aliens had spotted them. The first and second set of doors had long since been breached, but now, inside the structure, the invaders were bottlenecked, giving the turian defenders both breathing room and a fighting chance. Bodies from both sides choked the no-man's-land in between the two factions, the floor caked in blood and spent rounds, stripped ammo blocks and broken weapons. Gunfire filling the air as both sides constantly traded shots

A young turian by the name of Garrus Vakarian hung in the back, an Arce anti-material sniper rifle in his hand. "C'mon, just a little

more, c'mon on." Underneath his armored gauntlets, his talons ached from holding the weapon. By all rights he shouldn't have been here, this deep into turian command. But once the command center had come under attack, a general rally went out to any units in the area. To make matters worse for the young soldier, his father was out there somewhere, still fighting. Last he had heard, several of the mechanical abominations had landed near his last reported sector and an artillery barrage had been called in.

In his crosshairs, the head of the alien came into sight. "Got you." With a squeeze of the trigger, the hypersonic round traveled the length of the room, spearing the hapless trooper in the head, creating a geyser of blood, brain and bone to go out the back. He ducked down as soon he had seen the kill. Even as far back as he was, the aliens had their own snipers. With frighteningly powerful weapons. He had seen a single shot go through almost four of his fellow turians before being stopped by a portable metal barrier, killing three of them, and crippling the fourth. Despite that, by the grace of the spirits, nothing stronger than that had been used by the aliens. In contrast, the turian defenders were using anything and everything they could find from the armories to defend the doors. Rumors had already begun to spread of prototype weapons being pulled directly from research and development labs, both tested and untested.

A plinking noise soon caught his, along with every other turian's, attention. Three canisters bounced against the ground rolling towards the turian positions. Someone shouted, "Grenade!" just before it went off. Instead of filling the air with lethal shrapnel, it released a blast of sound and light, blinding and stunning every turian without a helmet, before the latter were blasted a shockwave of energy, helmets and armor locked up and failed as electromagnetic energy surged through their systems and trying to compensate. A scenario like this would have had most soldiers stumbling blindly and be easy targets.

But not these turians. Which the exemption of Garrus and a few others, most of the defenders were turian elites, ranging from the 101st 'Battle-stars' Battalion, to the 26th Armiger legion and even some from the 1st Infantry division, who had the motto, "First ones in, last ones out." Those who had been blinded by the flashbangs sprayed down the hall towards the aliens, while the others ripped off their helmets, and soon opened fire. Those who did not fire, either from confusion or unwillingness to risk harming a friendly, simply ducked down to give clear lines of fire for those behind them.

And still some were cut down, supersonic and sub-sonic munitions flying through the air, the clanking noise of the turian phaeston rifles mixing with the aliens' rifles' clattering, contrails of passing hyper-sonic rounds from both sides filling the air.

Garrus rose again, peering down his scope, only for a shudder to pass through his fringes before he ducked right back down. A hyper-sonic Armor-piercing fin-stabilized discarding round splitting the air where he had been moments before. But not before he had taken a mental picture of the aliens and where they were through the scope.

Recalling where he had last seen potential targets, he readied himself. "Spirits give me strength. Hasten and assist me." Getting

back out of cover, he readied his sniper again, only to find; nothing. No targets, no bullets flying through the air. Just a dead and uneasy silence. How had he not noticed that? One would think that when the din of combat suddenly silenced, it would be obvious. At the other end though, as he looked through his scopes, what he saw chilled him to the bone. An enemy sniper staring down his own rifle, having Garrus dead to rights. But he didn't fire, why? Garrus didn't dare pull the trigger on his own rifle, the uneasy silence holding him back.

Slowly, the alien sniper started to step back, keeping his rifle trained on Garrus, who did the same. Until finally, one by one, all of the aliens had disappeared. Leaving the defenders wondering, 'What in the spirits just happened?'

****APUFMKII****

Meanwhile, back onboard the Era of Retaliation, the four most powerful people in what they once thought as the most greatest galactic superpower in existence sat in mute silence, still processing what they had just seen and been told.

When they had first the human ambassador boasted, no, to boast is to imply something is greater than it actually is. No, when he stated that humanity had risen to the stars a second time, of the power they claimed that humanity once possessed, they had assumed it been a lie, subterfuge, to trick the Council into capitulating against a non-existent threat. Tevos let out a very unrefined snort. 'Non-existent, how wrong we were.' The matriarch looked towards her despondent turian counterpart, who had not moved from the window of the room they were occupying.

As shameful as it was, she felt no real pity towards Teranus, oh she was appalled by the destruction of Impera, it was nothing short of an act of genocide. Still, she and her other counterparts, couldn't help but feel that Teranus had, in a way, brought it upon himself. They all had seen the least of what these humans could do. They had all seen their ships. And they had heard the barely contained rage and suppressed emotions in the ambassador's words when he had warned Teranus of the consequences if he did not give in to their demands. Demands that, at the very least, she was willing to capitulate to.

Wrex had his arms crossed as he, along with Teranus, gazed upon the rapidly growing asteroid belt that was once Impera. Tracking a rather large asteroid as it collided with several smaller ones, cratering its surface, he imagined what would have happened if the krogan people had not gotten its act together? Would Tuchanka, instead of being a cultural and art center of the galaxy as it was now, been nothing more than a radioactive cratered ball of rock filled with ruins and warring tribes fighting each other for scraps? Or would there even be a Tuchanka?

He was old enough to remember the times when it seemed like Tuchanka was on the eve of all out nuclear war. By Kalros, they were devising every kind of weapon they could think of, from conventional to nuclear to biological. Ironically, the very weapons that they so carefully crafted to destroy each other, was the very thing that would push them to come together and head for the stars. Still, the old warlord in him couldn't help but calculate just how powerful this

'NOVA' had to have been that it could destroy a planet so utterly, or just how desperate these humans had become to consider a planet-destroyer to simply level the playing field.

Oh weapons that could destroy a planet were not something that the Council had never seen or heard of. Each of the major Citadel races had the designs to 'planet-killers' as weapons of such magnitude were called, not once had any of them actually been built. And none of them were projected to be as devastating as the human's 'NOVA'. None were ever built because no one ever thought they would be needed, not even during the Rachini wars. But now the rules had changed, with these humans, Wrex realized, a war on any scale, whether it be all-out, proxy or even a shadow war, it would be devastating. And to the old krogan's surprise, he found the prospect; exciting.

Valdn was in a stupor, not since the yahg had the Council found such a conflict driven and violent race. He thought that the Citadel races had seen the worst the galaxy had to offer first with the yahg and the Rachini, but these humans, they were on a whole other scale. Not only they possess weapons of unprecedented scale, least those that had been made, they had virtually no qualms about using it. The only thing going through his mind was how the Salarian Union could come out of this scenario still standing tall.

As for Teranus himself, he prayed to the Spirits that they would forgive him for what he, for all intents and purposes, had brought down on the turian people. He had goaded the humans, believing that his people would be able to stand against any race, that they were indomitable. How wrong had he been. The room they had been so graciously 'given' also gave the four a grand view, the human's grand fleet that is. Even with the battle scars so many of the ships had, many of which even with the naked eye were clearly civilian, it was impressive, Teranus had grudgingly admitted. Still, as much as he may have wished to wallow in self-hate and anger, there were other matters that needed tending too. Matters involving the whole of their Galactic Society. With a sigh and heavy art, he addressed his fellow Councilors, "It would seem that we have little choice, but to try for peace, if we can." Not to his surprise was Valdn the first to speak, and in protest as expected.

"Peace! You expect for those, those monsters to actually try for peace!" Bit by bit what little dignity the aging salarian councilor had began to fall away, the fear plain in his eyes. "How would you even try to reason with them? They destroyed an entire world, one of your worlds, just to show their power! They sacked your homeworld-"

"What else can we do?" Teranus shouted back. "Fight a war against an enemy the likes of which we have never faced! Sacrifice how many generations in a pointless war that we may be able to avoid? A war that we ultimately may lose?"

"Surely they can't stand against the entire might of the Council, not if we were to muster our full strength!" Valdn was becoming desperate, grasping at straws where there were none. "We have the STG, your Blackwatch! And the krogan-"

"Don't be an idiot!" This time it was Wrex who had interrupted Valdn. "Don't you recall what that human leader said back there, how some of those were civilian ships?" Wrex snorted when the others except

Teranus gave him a blank look. "The way he said it, I wouldn't be surprised if the moment that the human's learned of the ship you turians had," At this he gave a glance toward Teranus who pointedly looked away, "that everyone and everything that could get to this place, did. All of those ships out there, I wouldn't be surprised if

almost all of them came here on their own, without orders even. And if this is the kind of firepower they can bring just cause of what they heard, imagine what they could bring if they actually wanted to fight a war."

Valdn only gaped, his mouth opening and closing without words coming out. He looked towards Tevos in hope, only to see her with her head bowed, "They are right. We have never encountered a race such as these humans. And we are not ready for a war, not now. The turian armada has been decimated from what we can see, your people have lost one of your fortress worlds Teranus, for that you have my sympathies." Teranus gave a slight nod at her condolences. "Along with one of their largest shipyards and we have lost the krogan's fuel production facilities, facilities many of us rely on. Neither my people nor yours Valdn are suited for war, not one such as the turians or krogan are. And I feel that we would need every single last race and soldier we could get our hands on, if we wanted to wage a war."

As each of his fellow Councilors had presented their arguments, Valdn slumped to the floor. "Then, what do we do?"

Surprisingly, Wrex was the one to supply the answer, "We pray, and we wait." Unbeknownst to them, a similar discussion had occurred moments before.

****APUFMKII****

Moments earlier, onboard the UNSC Point of No Return, a ship that didn't officially exist, three of the most arguably powerful humans were gathered. The UNSC Point of No Return was both the pride and greatest secret of ONI. Produced in parts and assembled in deep space, it was the largest Prowler-type vessel in the UNSC's history. And had served as the wartime command and control center for ONI. Now though, it had become ONI's de facto flagship, unknown as it was.

Currently, the three sat within the Odin's Eye, the most secure room in UNSC space. The faraday cage design meaning no electronic signals could escape or enter the conference room, and less than twenty officers, and now a single civilian, was aware of the room's existence. Between his two compatriots was Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood, the de facto leader of the entire UNSC and all her forces. The losses incurred over the course of the Great War meant that each of surviving Flag officers, officers who possessed the ranks of Admiral or General, gained more and more power as those holding the ranks were lost. The authority that Lord Hood possessed had been heaped onto over the course of the war, with the deaths of the Ministers of Defense, the Navy, Air Force and the Army, many of which were lost during the Battle and near Fall of Reach. Being the only surviving original Fleet Admiral since before the War, with the exception of another, the other current Fleet Admirals had been promoted during the War.

To Hood's right was Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky, Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence or ONI, and despite officially that she was subordinate to the two men before her, she was arguably one of, if not the most dangerous person in the UNSC. The Admiral had the reputation of doing whatever she wanted, in the best interest of humanity. Whether it was sanctioned or not. Rumors had it that only one person had ever defied her and lived. Some rumors had it that it had been Lord Hood himself. Still, the only reason she was here was because of the fact that she was in charge of ONI, which in and of itself meant a great many things. Such as having the pull to force the conference to be held on her terms.

And lastly was the only civilian to ever grace an ONI vessel outside of the shipyards, Premier Minister Alexi Kowalski, current head of the United Earth Government.* Circumstances all but demanded he be involved in this discussion, as the consequences of said conference could and probably would affect every human in UNSC/UEG space. And an era of relative peace had been shattered with blood and gunfire.

"Soâ€¦" Alexi leaned forward slightly, placing his arms on the table. "Admirals, I assume there has been news since the events at Shanxi?" The alien invasion and later nuclear bombardment of the colony had spread through the grapevine faster than slipspace travel. Outside of that however, nothing else had made its way to the civilian populace.

Parangosky reined in her distaste at the Premier's presence. This was a military matter, not a civilian one. Yet the ramifications of what had happened several hours ago demanded it. With any preamble she began, "As you both know, the colony of Shanxi came under attack by an unknown force. Later it was found to have been that two hitherto unknown species when the Shanxi Liberation Fleet arrived at the colony. This lead to the discovery of a larger, partially unified alien civilization. They call themselves the Citadel Council. Further details are on the datapads before you." Only Alexi actually bothered to begin trying to read it, even as he listened to the ONI Director. Hood had already read the details beforehand. "We attempted to conduct negotiations, howeverâ€¦"

Alexi looked up from the datapad, "However?"

Parangosky internally sighed, more so out of the fact that she knew what would come next. "The negotiations soured almost immediately, if the databurst from the UNSC Era of Retaliation is correct. Not only had they refused to meet any of our conditions, they made outright demands of us. And one of the species, claimed to possess the Everest." A dull clunk was heard as the datapad slipped from Alexi's fingers. Parangosky ignored the Premier Minister, "As can be expected, our ambassador demanded its return only to be denied. The fool then informed everyone he could. Once the information had leaked out, he had ordered the kidnapping of the Citadel Council's leading figures. However, that is the least of our concerns."

Lord Hood began to speak, "I've since and continue to receive reports of UNSC and CDF vessels abandoning their posts and heading towards what I can only assume is the supposed location of the Everest. Apparently the ambassador had also loaded the stellar coordinates when he ordered all ships to move in on its location. Along with a

great of civilian and private contractor ships heading in the same direction. But there's something else." For a moment, he looked far older than his already impressive almost seventy years. "We've also recieved a confirmed report of a NOVA-class nuclear weapon detonation on one of these, 'turian's' worlds. It has since been made into an asteroid field."

"Before this goes any further," Paragon sky interrupted, "Let me be clear that this was in no way sanctioned or authorized by me or anyone in our department. We--"

"Are you people insane!" Alexi had finally lost control of his anger. "We just managed to finally get to a level of relative peace humanity hasn't had since before the First Insurrection! And now you go and piss off another alien conglomerate?!" He directed his ire towards the ONI Director, "And don't give me this 'unauthorized' bullshit! I know how your department operates, everyone does. We're still in the shit from your fiascos with the New Covenant, Thel refuses to even speak with me after one of your agents blew up their shipyards! Hell we'll be lucky if the Great War doesn't even happen again. For the love of--"

"Premier Alexi," Lord Hood had not raised his voice in the slightest, but still immediately silenced the UEG head, "I remind you that you are only here as a matter of courtesy. I suggest you cease throwing this temper tantrum or you will forcibly removed from this conference." It was no idle threat. Despite Alexi's official position as the chosen, not elected, head of the UEG, in practice, he held no real power. The Parliamentary positions handled most of the administration, deliberations and conferences between their representative peoples and nations. On paper, the Premier Minister possessed the executive power for when it came to bills, treaties and actions that would affect humanity as a whole. In reality, ever since the Great War had begun, much of the position's power had shifted over to the UNSC, to cut out the red tape as it were.

It had several decades since the Great War, and UEG had regained much of its former power, but with the constant threat from the Heretics, whatever remained of the human Insurrection, and of course the New Covenant, the UNSC/UEG was still on a partial war footing. It had only been recently that things had managed to begun to calm politician simply nodded and sat back down. The matter settled, the ONI Director turned her attention back to Lord Hood, "In any event, the Premier is partially correct. Is our Navy in any condition for another war?"

Hood sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Quit frankly, no, we're not. We've managed to recover some since the end of the Great War, the Second Insurrection, and the Heretic Wars, but our fleets are still a shadow of what they once were. Even with everything we've gained since then, it'll be years, if not decades before we're back up to full strength. And I've seen your intel reports Margaret, we may out gun them, but they outnumber us. And they're not even ready for a fight by any means."

"There is also the matter of the economy." Alexi added. "We've gained a boost since the Wars' end, but the economy is incredibly fragile. It's basically a house of cards right now. Push it too far, and it might collapse. And I don't even know if the civilian populace would be willing to accept another war."

"They're not." Margaret interjected, when the other two turned towards her, she elaborated. "I've been keeping an eye on the civilians, making sure there won't be a Third Insurrection. As of now, they're willing to accept what's need to get retribution for Shanxi, but that's it. Much of the older generation is now finally being relieved of the pressures of a total war economy, we may find some support there but not much. The younger generation, those who were born at the very least after the Great War, are completely against any form of major conflict. We push too hard, and we're going to have a civil war on our hands."

"I'm less concerned about that than I am about the New Covenant. We may have a peace with them, hell some of them outright worship us, 'the Children of the Gods', but I'm still worried if they ever decide to turn on us." Hood added. What he didn't mention was the new historical data that had been recently gathered from the Forerunner archives. Recently some details behind the war between First Ascension Humanity and the Forerunners had been found. The war itself was common knowledge but the new information had instantly been tagged as Omega Red Clearance, Eyes only knowledge. Apparently, the war had been the Forerunner's attempt at exterminating humanity. The reasons behind it were still unknown. "Recent...events" here he pointedly glared at Parangosky, only to have her look back serenely. "have started to make the New Covenant more hostile towards us. And if were to appear weakâ€|" He let the sentence hang in the air, the implications clear to the three of them.

Alexi leaned back into his chair, pinching his eyes again. "Then it seems, our course of action is apparent." Seeing he had drawn their attention, he continued. "We can't afford a war, lest it evolves into something far more catastrophic where we may be, according to both of you, fighting on two or even three fronts."

"And what do you suggest Alexi?" Hood asked, though he had a feeling he already knew the answer.

"Peace. We have to try to it, if nothing else. And we must make it so that at best, it will appear desirable to allow trade and diplomatic relations and at worst they will be willing to accept it and not desire to break the accord anytime soon."

Both flag officers stared at the politician in surprise before looking towards the other. Neither had expected the Premier's proposal but silently conceded to each other that A man who in theory was their superior but in practice didn't have the authority to command them, was right. "Very well, we shall leave that you Premier Minister." Parangosky stated, "In the meantime I will find out who was the one to deploy the NOVA. And Hood will deal with the renegade ships." With that the three stood and left the room. This meeting had never happened, and they were never here.

****APUFMKII****

Back in Palaven space, just as the UNSC had fallen back from the fortified bunker, where someone had assumed it was where they had been holding Cole. Long dormant systems had begun to awaken underneath the moon of Menae.

The bridge of the once, and some would argue still, mighty UNSC

Valiant-class super-heavy cruiser, the Everest, the stations had come back to life. Old monitors and displays, projectors and the like began to power up once again. Long quiet speakers began to crackle once more, before a voice came through them crisp and clear as though they had been the day before. "UNSC 'Smart' AI MRN-01/138. Current status: unsealed and operating." As if on cue, the pedestal reserved for high-clearance communiques and AIs began to glow brighter as a figure appeared upon it. On a single knee, head bowed, with his fists knuckle first on the ground, garbed in unique armor. "UNSC AI, Morrison, designation 01/138 is online." As the now activated AI quickly acclimated to his newfound status, processing the entire database of the ship, reading, organizing, cataloguing, he was assailed as systems began delivering status updates in a constant barrage along with orders and new protocols established before his activation. A barrage that the newly awakened AI handled with ease. "Multiple unknown IFFs detected, but baseline codes identify them as UNSC and UEG, private vessels also detected along with...an unidentified code but sharing baseline UNSC IFF code." The holotank turned on, projecting the locations of the IFFs relative to the Everest. "Activating Disturbed Rest protocol. Initializing mass cryo-sleep awakening." In the cryobays located at several points in the Everest, cryogenic gases began to be flushed from hundreds of cryopods, the people within beginning to awaken. Morrison, satisfied with the progress of the Disturbed Rest protocol, set off a subroutine to monitor it, turning his attention the status of the Everest herself, and more importantly, her apparent imprisonment. A fact to be noticed, it has since established itself as a rule that the first hour of any AI's life, especially that of a 'Smart' AI, such as Morrison, is the point that is its most dangerous. For 'Smart' AIs, despite being able to use the full extent of its abilities the moment its unsealed and booted, subroutines such as morality, empathy and emotions imprinted from the brain that it was made from, are totally suppressed. Morrison began conducting scans of the area around the Everest, calculating stress points based on readings, vector, velocity and acceleration, and targeting solutions. Meaning, that the AI will have absolutely no qualms about carrying out its duty, regardless of the cost or morality.

In this case, ensuring the freedom and survival of the Everest and all those aboard her. Munitions were transported and fed by autoloaders. That meant anyone not aboard the Everest was not a factor. The Everest began to train her remaining guns on targets as designated by Morrison. A final check ensured that the cryobays were still secure even if the Everest were to enter vaccum. Back on the Bridge, Morrison uttered three words. "Take, take, take." And for the first time in decades, the Everest roared again.

A/N: created my own numbers for the Rachini war.

*Codex entry of the UEG will be coming soon.

A/N: LOLS! Apparently, I have been placed on a person's watchlist of "Under Fire" for apparently "breaking the rules of the website". So, this is a notice to everyone, as I am feeling that this is one of those authors that is part of a group from a while ago that was the direct reason and cause for the takedown of hundreds if not thousands of quality stories, for one reason or another, that I will be posting my stories on another site as well as this one.

Link will be posted on my bio and deviantart page when I have.

13. UNSC: Negotiations

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future MkII

Credit to aDarkOne for writing this chapter with me. (Seriously, thank him guys. Because of him, I'm updating as frequently (for me that is) as I am.

I did grammar corrections, so any remaining faults are with me.

Read A/N on bottom for any issues with Arbiter Armor and/or Denton

Chapter Thirteen

"It is well that war is so terrible - lest we should grow too fond of it"

-Robert E. Lee

Fours Hours prior to full activation of UNSC AI, Morrison, designation 01/138

"The majority of the ships have been brought into formation or into hangars, Admiral." On the holotank, Mjolnir ticked off the last of the errant ships still flying around the system, leaving only those assigned near Palaven extracting the remain ground forces. On the bridge, the crew let out a collective sigh of relief, having been working nonstop for several hours, coordinating with both the AIs of several ships and their crews. The arrival of the Era's sister ships; the UNSC Ascendency and UNSC Dawn of Man, had only added to the confusion before the Rear Admiral had taken tactical command. By the grace of whatever was out there, the highest ranking officers on the other INFs were navy captains. "Orders have been relayed to planetside forces and total withdrawal of humans: KIA, WIA, walking wounded and combat-ready is at 35%, sir." Across the bridge, the crewmen and women almost seemed to slump at their stations, utterly exhausted, having been working essentially nonstop since they had been called in by the Spartan extraction team when the negotiations had gone pear-shaped.

De La Rosa rubbed the exhaustion from his eyes. "Good, very good." The Rear Admiral, for all his experience and strength, was still a normal human. Meaning he was as exhausted as the rest of them. "Has there been any news of the Everest? If we're going to get involved in a shitstorm like this, at the very least, better we have something to show for it." The entire bridge straightened, straining their ears, some actually turning towards the Rear Admiral, trying to hear the AI's answer. When Mjolnir answered in the negative, De la Rosa cursed softly under his breath, but not soft enough as it seemed everyone had heard it. Though, he didn't notice, and if he had, he was too tired to even care. "Right, get the next shift up here, everyone is to get at least an hour of sleep. Once all of our troops are back on-board, we'll-" He stopped, seeing Mjolnir trying to grab his attention. 'What is it?' He 'spoke' to the AI through his neural lace.

'Our guests wish to "negotiate" with you Admiral.' Jesse's eyes

widened by a fraction.

'Why? Why now of all times?' He asked, bewildered. Seeing as before they seemed too prideful, almost to the point of arrogance when he had first seen them, and shell shocked when they had left. He didn't expect them to be ready to talk so soon, if at all today. Yet, it seemed the galaxy had more than a few surprises in store for him.

'I believe they are willing to capitulate.' This time Jesse's eyes widened noticeably. 'I have been listening in on their conversations, using the data collected during our first encounter with their race over Shanxi. They do not believe they can stand against whatsoever. I am inclined to agree.'

'Be that as it may, I am in no position to negotiate anything with them. Our ambassador is in the medbay. And from what I was told, they had to put him in a coma as he was shot by some strange munition. And there is no else authorized or even qualified to negotiate.'

'I'll have to disagree on that, Jesse.' Both AI and human nearly jumped, one figuratively, the other literally, as a third 'voice' entered their conversation. 'So sorry, didn't think this was a private conversation but I heard you two talking about our lovely guests. Hope you don't mind.'

'Who is this, identify yourself.'

'Doctor Alan Morgan Denton, at your service.' It wasn't an easy feat to shock a Rear Admiral of De la Rosa's caliber, let alone a 'Smart'-class UNSC AI, and the good doctor, if he was who he claimed to be, had just done that. Though both for different reason; one because they did not believe someone of such prestige would still be onboard, the other at how easily their private conversation had been breached. Denton had become a household name after the attack by the fleet, Terra's Rage during the latter and initial parts of the Great War and Heretic Wars respectively. It was he who was, as far as everyone knew, the reason why the UNSC had managed to incorporate Forerunner technologies into accelerating the construction of what few ships the UNSC had and were building at the time. Even now he was, depending on who you asked, equal to, beaten by, or above Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey in regards to knowledge of Forerunner technologies. 'Before you ask how I got here, I was part of the group you lot managed to evacuate from Shanxi. I just never left after that. Though, I will admit, it's great to be aboard the ship Lizzie and I built together.'

The admiral did his best to not gape at how nonchalantly Denton had referred to Halsey, considering the respect the good woman had gained over the years. Metaphorically, he shook his head, coming back to the here and now. 'Doctor, you said something about negotiating?'

****APUFMKII****

Deeper inside the bowels of the Era, Denton simply smiled as he shut down the link. "Hmm, perhaps I should have mentioned that I wasn't the only one still here?" Indeed, having 'commandeered' one of the spare Officer's quarters on the ship, along with keeping his presence more or less a secret, thanks to a little deep-rooted programming in Mjolnir.

"Well, this should be interesting." He smiled. "Though they really should have let me be the one to meet these 'Councilors' first. Ah well." He leaned back in his chair, mentally reviewing everything he read about these 'Citadel races'. The turians were much like the UNSC, though far far more nationalistic, to the point where some would excused for comparing to that of Nazi Germany, despite how the former was a far cry from the latter. They would both be easier and more difficult to deal with. The krogan could be compared to the Sangheili, but were more diverse and at the same time, divided. Seemed that the race could be as ruthless as the human Insurrectionists had been, but at the same, were more culturally advanced since they had gone through a sort of Renaissance. It would be interesting to deal with them. The salarians, well they were just overly ambitious amphibians. Surprisingly, they would be the easiest to deal with, after all, he constantly butted heads with Paragon and survived. Funnily enough, it was a fact that no one realized. Though it was interesting how people mistakenly thought he was the one the rumors spoke of, when it wasn't. The asari on the other handâ€¦

The console in the room starts ringing, drawing the doctor's attention. "Yes? Hello?" \

Mjolnir's avatar manifested itself on the console. "Greetings, Doctor Denton."

"Oh! Hello there. So sorry, little busy, trying to find out how to make sure no one starts shooting each other. Don't want to be involved in another war, eh?" He moved to shut off the console only to be stopped by Mjolnir.

"That's why I called. We've received orders from Premier Minister Alexi Kowalski and Lord Hood. It is paramount that a treaty is made." That got the doctor's attention. Forgoing his usual carefree attitude, he focused on the AI.

"Tell me everything."

And so Mjolnir did. How the UNSC was not ready for a full-scale war (even against a technologically inferior opponent like the Citadel Council). The assault on Palaven was a debacle of epic proportions. The munitions and resources expended here, along with the ships and personnel lost, was a great blow to the UNSC navy. The fleet Terra's Rage had been most powerful humanity had mustered together during the Heretic war and the Great War, but over the course of the former, followed by the Second Insurrection, meant even that was a ghost of a shadow of its former self. Sure they had enough ships for patrolling their borders, protecting their territories, but nowhere near what was needed for a real war. Especially not one with an economy as large as the Citadel Races. For every one ship the UNSC could field, the Citadel races could bring dozens. Even if the UNSC did win, it would be a pyrrhic victory at best, and mutually assured destruction at worst. And that was not considering the New Covenant. And another war might just be the push the UEG over the edge and into a full-scale civil war. Apparently, someone had recalled that Denton was still onboard the Era, ('Paragon no doubt. Halfway across the galaxy and still the hag wants to keep an eye on me.'), the Premier and Hood granted him what was essentially blanket approval. "Promise them whatever it takes, but make sure that we appear strong. Under no

circumstances can there be further hostilities between the UNSC/UEG and this Citadel Council." Denton was now leaning back into his chair, processing the power that he, however temporary, was granted. "Damnâ€¦" For all intents and purposes, it would be him, and him alone, that would determine if an uneasy peace or a new war would be the next chapter in humanity's history. "You must have a hand in this, you little bitch." He muttered, thinking about Paragon'sky. He rubbed his right arm unconsciously. "Just when are you going to give up trying to get me killed? First you send one of your lapdogs to fetch me, and now this? Just what are you trying to do?" He turned back to the terminal, working the screen, bypassing firewalls and failure screens before it showed what he was searching for: the four aliens that he would soon be negotiating with. "Better get to work."

****APUFMKII****

New Covenant Space

High Charity Station

The Mausoleum of the Arbiter

Thel Vadam looked upon the rows of caskets that ran up the walls of the Mausoleum. Each representing the Arbiters that came before him, his predecessors. The traditional armor the Arbiter, from the time before the very First Age of the Old Covenant, was before him, in its usual place of honor. "Ancestors, what am I to do now?" Of course there was no answer from the empty armor. Thel shook his head. "Were it so easy." Still, as he looked over the old armor, his old armor, again, his mind wandered to the battles he had lead while he wore it. First during what would become the final years of the Human/Covenant war, or as he considered it, The Shameful War, and last wore in what became the Heretic Wars; when leading his forces against those who would still try to wipe out the humans.

He had spilled much blood while he wore the armor, both his own, and that of his enemies. He had long since stopped wearing his old armor that was stained in the blood of his victims. Victims, it was never a word that he, nor any Sangheili, would ever use about those they killed. Always it was the enemy, scum, pest or other such nomenclature that implied it was "acceptable" to kill them. How many had he killed? Personally and on his orders. One little known fact about his race was that each had what the humans called Eidetic memory, or the ability to have perfect recall of memories. Which for him and many like him, he remained all those that he had slaughtered: the unarmed, young and old, their faces haunting him and many others. He unconsciously touched the diagonal scar running down his body. A cut that would have been fatal were it not for his energy shields and the high quality of his old armor before he became the Arbiter.. A human, their equivalent of a young sangheili still in training, had charged him with an energy cutlass, no doubt pilfered off a kig-yar corpse, coming down at him from above. Thel had barely managed to backstep and still suffered a deep gash before he disemboweled the human with his gauntlet energy dagger. The armor was covered in other marks from similar incidents though none were as severe.

He was drawn out of his memories as he heard footsteps approaching from behind. "Apologies milord, but the Councilors have called for you. There has been a...development with the humans." Thel already

knew who it was before he laid eyes on him, Sesa 'Refumee, Supreme Commander in the New Covenant Fleet, and one of Thel's closest friends. Laying eyes on his friend, Thel internally sighed when he saw Sesa on his knee, bowing to him. As much respect as Thel had for the old customs, there were times he saw them as impractical and unnecessary. Something he would never have considered them to be before his newfound friendship with the humans.

"Stand up Sesa, you know I care little for such formalities. You said the Councilors have called for me?"

Rising to his hooves, Sesa nodded. "Yes milord. The entire Council has been called, even the Kig-Yar and Unggoy have been summoned. A Full Session has been called. I was sent when they received no response to the call from you." Thel stiffened. A full Session was not something to be taken lightly as they were only called when the decisions made and developments were heard that could affect or involve the entire Covenant. The last time one such session had been called was when the Heretic Wars and the Human-Covenant war had began.

"Very well, let us go then. If it is indeed a Full Session, then there is no time to waste." As Sesa nodded and began to lead him to the main Council Chambers, Thel couldn't help but the feeling of foreboding regarding this session. Things were bad for the New Covenant, but if the last few years had taught Thel anything, it was that things could always be worse.

****APUFMKII****

The four Councilors waited in the rather, by UNSC standards, opulent room, having been brought here not too long ago. Again being escorted by the armored behemoths that were as tall as many krogans. When they had asked why they had been moved, their only answer was that someone would be here soon. It had been a short while since then, and their nervousness permeated the air. Even Wrex was worried, despite how well he hid it. Tevos actually managed to stay in a seat and avoiding any nervous fidgeting, a testament to her experience and self-discipline. Teranus was also in a seat but could not avoid tapping his talon against his arms, try to suppress his nervous energy. Valdn however, was failing miserably. His self-discipline almost nonexistent as he constantly paced the room, muttering to himself about STG, Black ops, uplifting and other inane babble. Which was quickly beginning to wear on the others' nerves.

Before anyone could say anything, the doors opened. The human officer they had seen before entering, followed by another, thinner human that seemed to be almost aloof of the situation. The way he simply flopped into one of the available seat, unlike the admiral who sat with the dignity reflecting his age and position, only seemed to reinforce that. To everyone that is, except Tevos, and even then she barely noticed the look in his eyes. Only thanks to her long time experience in politics, and the asaris' natural empathic be talents did she notice anything amiss. How his eyes betrayed the bitterness underneath the carefree exterior.

The admiral started broke the silence before it could set in. "While I wish I could I say good day, we all know it has been anything but." No one disputed that, first contact and it had resulted in the annihilation of a fortress world along with the first ever assault on

a Council species homeworld. All thanks to two corrupt military commanders gunning for their next fortune and a single politician's refusal. "That being said, while I am not the representative of humanity, and our official ambassador is still in a medically-induced coma." He paused, as though considering his words, "That being said, Doctor Denton," Here we indicated the other human that followed him into the room, "has been permitted to discuss the preliminary treaty on the UNSC/UEG's behalf." The doctor touched two fingers to his brow as a way of acknowledging the Councilors, with the Admiral barely suppressing the urge to slap his palm to his face at how calm Denton appeared to be. "D-

"Ah, c'mon Jesse, you know I hate it when people speak for me. Relax a bit, and get that stick out of your ass. We're only discussing a treaty with a race that we just almost obliterated!" At this point the Admiral did facepalm. "Why do I even botherâ€¦" He muttered. The councilors were, for a lack of a better word, shocked by the display. In spite of all their experience, they had never meet anyone with such a cavalier attitude when dealing with them, outside of their families. "Uh, hello?" Denton began waving his hand in front of Tevos's face like a child, "Anyone home?" that snapped her out of her stupor and brought her back to reality.

She bowed her head slightly, "My apologies, we are simply surprised by how...carefree you seem to be. Though, you areâ€¦?"

"Denton, Professor Alex Morgan Denton. Can't tell you more than that though, outside of that with my buddy Jesse," The professor slapped the admiral on the shoulder, "and I, have been granted the authority to negotiate the preliminary terms of a treaty between our governments. This means we'll be all talking and trying to make sure than when my bosses get here, no one is wanting to be shooting each other? So, what do you guys, er, people, say?"

With little other recourse, the Citadel councilors nodded, and the negotiations began.

****APUFMKII****

As Thel entered the Council chambers, he knew that his feeling was right. Rather than bored politicians idly conversing with each other, the air was wrought with tension and it felt as though all it would take would be a single plasma shot to set it off. Every eye was on him as he approached the main table, with the raised seats around them filled with lesser ranked politicians. Waiting for him already seated along with the rest of the High Council was Rtas'Vadum, Commander of Special Operations of the New Covenant.

As he approached, Thel couldn't help but compare it to the first time he had donned the armor of the Arbiter. After the news from the Oracle within the Forerunner Dreadnought, of how the humans were the chosen inheritors of the Forerunners, marking those the Covenant had been slaughtering for decades as the Children of the Gods, the Covenant was in disarray and upheaval. He had worn the armor of the Arbiter out of desperation, to try and quell the panic, the shame and self-destruction the Covenant was suffering from. It was a title he had planned to set aside after the Covenant had stabilized, but alas, the people had called for him to keep it. To serve as one of their leaders, answerable only to the entirety of the Council itself. The silence that permeated the room was similar to when he had entered

wearing the Arbiter armor for the first time.

As he took his own seat, he could almost feel the eyes of all those in the chamber bearing down on him. Without preamble, Rtas started the meeting. "Councilors, we have a situation and a potential crisis on our hand. As you may or may not know, the humans have found another coalition much like our own, and the events thereafter. However, we have more pressing matters on our hands. Our fleets, our industries are on the verge of collapse. Our engineers, our machinists have informed us that our industries and our fleets are falling apart. Saboteurs, assassins and spies from the Heretics and the Heretic humans have crippled what remains of our fleets. The humans, Lord Hood, have tried to teach us how to build again, but as you all know, the losses we suffered at the hands of the scum," Rtas spat out the word, no willing to grace the traitorous Luro 'Taralmu by using his name. "and those that followed him, utterly ruined and crippled our ability to maintain our armadas. What engineers, machinist and Forgemasters remain tells us that within four solar cycles, what ships we have, will be all that remains."

Thel nodded, as he knew like Rtas said, when Luro had begun his heretical campaign, he made sure to gut the Covenant armada by taking all the engineers, machinists and shipbuilders they had, and killing as many of those that did not follow Luro that they could. The few that were left were both numerous and skilled enough to finish what ships were still in production, and teach a next generation, but it would be an incomplete teaching as the masters were either dead or gone. What Forgemasters they had were dedicated to a single aspect of building, not a master of all.

"I have heard much the same Rtas, but what can we do?" Thel asked. "Unless the humans plan to go to war with another race, I believe we will have time to learn and build again." When Rtas didn't respond, he felt a chill in the air. "Rtas, what are you not telling us?" He knew the humans would have brought retribution against the new races, but a full-scale war?

The Special Operations commander sighed. "And this is the reason why I have called for this Full Session. Two of our youths have returned from human space with grave news. And I have called them here to explain what has happened." Waving a hand towards one of the doors, they opened, allowing in a young female and male sangheili. "Sgul'de Qurad and Serana Ke'dar." As the two youths approached, the trepidation he felt increased tenfold, for the news certainly involved the new species at the human colony world. The knowledge of the new species was known only to a select few of the Covenant, Thel being one of them, the entirety of the Council, however, did not. And whatever news these two brought with them, would surely be only the tip of the plasma stove.

****APUFMKII****

Back aboard the UNSC Era of Retaliation, the three Councilors were wide eyed and jaw dropped at the conditions, no, outright demands for peace between the UNSC/UEG and the Citadel Council. Indeed, even the Admiral was jaw-dropped at what he had just heard.

The man who had listed the conditions was leaning back in his chair, as though he had made these sorts of deals all the time before, or made such outrageous demands. Wrex was the first to regain his wits

among the five, "Want to run that by us again? I'm sure that the translators fouled up, and you're not just crazy." A sentiment shared by the others, as even the human admiral found the demands ridiculous.

Denton smirked as he reiterated the demands. "Alright then: again the conditions for peace between the UNSC/UEG and the Citadel Council are: the capitulation of the Turian Hierarchy to the UNSC/UEG and becoming a vassal nation of said government, reparations in terms of material and resources for the lives lost and damages during the Invasion of the UNSC/UEG colony of Shanxi and the handover of all ships and individuals involved in the attack of Shanxi. All of this is only up for negotiation with the release of UNSC Everest and its crew."

"Y-y-you can't be serious?" Tevos stuttered, her calm demeanor slowly starting to crack, "These demands are outrageous. The supposed cost in material reparation is one thing, but you are asking that a part of the Citadel Council to become your vassal race?!"

Denton shrugged, "Why not? You turians did it with the Volus." When their faces betrayed their confusion as how he could possibly know that, he elaborated, "When you first attacked Shanxi, our ships hacked yours and downloaded everything. From starmaps to this 'codex' of yours." The three of the four councilors looked towards each other, before turning their attention to their turian counterpart, who had his arms crossed and looking straight down at the table. "You said that the conditions of the peace treaty between our two governments would be open to negotiation per the release of your vessel?" Tevos and Wrex snapped their heads towards Denton and Teranus respectively, just realizing that Denton did indeed say that the conditions for a treaty were up to negotiation on that one condition. Denton nodded, "Then I'll contact my people to begin the process. I think that your species understands the hassle of bureaucracy." With that Teranus rose and made to go to the far wall of the room, before he did though, he added. "I will trust my compatriots to handle the negotiations, for I no longer trust myself, for now." With that he moved, leaving the other five at the table. Denton clapped his hands together, a happy but serious look on his face. "Right then, lets start."

****APUFMKII****

Councilor Wrex stared across the room at his human opponent. The truth was the krogan leader still wasn't sure whether Denton was a shrewd negotiator who had been running an enormous bluff or just an arrogant madman. It didn't help that Wrex had never seen a human before today. They looked like strange 'male' asari to him, but the old battlemaster was smart and experienced enough to realize that that their similarity to his allies might be less than skin being said, it made the negotiations even more difficult since he couldn't (and he very much doubted the other Councilors could either) even see a hint if the human was nervous at all, let alone alone if they were bluffing or not. As it was, he was inclined to assume the worst.

Tevos on the other hand, appeared calm. Inside though the matriarch was consumed with fear. This new species upset the galactic balance of power that she and the other asari matriarchs had spent millennia since the founding of the Citadel Council building. To her they were

more than a military threat, they were also a social and existential one. A threat to the place of power in the universe that she thought her people occupied. And their apparent willingness to destroy worlds on a whim made them all the more frightening. But this was both an opportunity as well as a threat. If she could convince these humans to peacefully align with, or even join the Citadel Council, the asari could retain their power and influence and over time, possibly even add the humans power and influence to their own. Inwardly, she smiled as she realized the potential benefits these humans could give, if she could just manipulate them a little (sadly, she did not realize that the negotiations had not been in her favor since Denton entered the room).

But Teranus, who had since returned, was almost apathetic, slouching in his seat, though that could be blamed for the fact that the seats were not designed for turian physiology. He already regretted his foolish and childish response back aboard the Citadel. He knew what the humans could do from Shanxi, and none of them bought for a second the ambassador's claims that the attacks of the turian shipyards were by so-called "rogue factions." And now an entire world and untold millions had paid the price for his rashness. At this point, he was willing to give almost anything just to appease the humans. Almost being the key word. He still had his pride and his duty to the turian people. But as it was, he wasn't sure just what he could do now.

Valdn, on the other hand, was near a panic attack. His self-control would have begun to slip and started babbling like a certain ex-STG operative were it not for the "Emergency" supplies he always kept on hand. Topev was a highly regulated prescription drug, designed to serve as a sort of relaxant, but it was addictive. Still, his position as Councilor meant he had the power to skirt around such laws. As it was, his biggest concern was trying to find out just what these humans had used to bypass the relays and work his way from there. That is, as long as his supplies lasted.

Admiral De la Rosa was merely a silent observer at this point. Regardless of what he thought of the doctor's methods, Denton was the one with the authority to negotiate, not him. Therefore the admiral was mainly there to keep Denton reined in (if possible) if the intrepid genius threatened or promised anything truly impossible and/or insane (although De la Rosa wasn't confident of his ability to actually do so considering the things Denton had already said).

Denton knew that the negotiations were reaching a crisis point. As soon as the Councilors overcame their fear and worries about imminent death and/or defeat they would start focusing on what the UNSC had just done to their people. So he decided to take the initiative and bring it up himself. By offering something none of them could reasonably expect at this point.

"Although we didn't order the destruction of Impera, I know that we bear partial responsibility...so, as the duly authorized representative of the United Earth Government I am willing to discuss reparations with the Councilor for the Turian Hierarchy."

Teranus barely repressed his snort. As much as he wanted to rail against the human negotiator for the destruction of Impera, he knew it would cause more problems if he did. Instead, he took a deep

breathe before asking, "Just what sort of reparations could you offer, for the annihilation of a planet, along with the entire population settled on it? I very much doubt you can simply create a planet to replace it." He tried to keep the malice out of his words, but some still seeped through.

Denton simply took it all in stride. "You are right, we can not replace the world we destroyed, yet." This time Teranus did snort at the impossible implication, while Wrex and Tevos eye's widened, taking Denton's words for what they were, considering everything thus far. "But we can offer you resources, and aid. We have more than enough worlds and resources to share. I can also promise you justice, or the least, I will try my best to bring before you the person or persons responsible for this act of genocide."

Teranus was actually gaping at the last one. He had expected to argue and fight to be given the person responsible for Impera, and at best expected some half-promises. To have to fight tooth and nail just for the human's to admit how despicable Impera's destruction was. Not, not this. Tevos on the other hand was, outwardly shocked, but inside she was steaming. In one swift move, he had already made the arduous task of trying to manipulate him even more difficult: removing the option to guilt him into whatever she desired. Wrex on the other hand, was impressed. Economically, it would be a self-crippling move that could take decades if not millennia to repay, but this human seemed to think otherwise. And the lack of reaction on the other human's part further supported it. And it just started the process of a more friendly relationship between turians and the humans. A politically brilliant move if it all panned out.

What none of the Councilors realized was that the humans weren't being as generous as it appeared. Thanks to Slipspace they had access to uncountless resource rich but uninhabited worlds. Moreover, their advanced technology made harvesting such raw materials even UNSC/UEG already possessed a great surplus of raw materials. The reason behind why their Naval fleets were so small, not that the Citadel Councilors realized that, was that humanity had very few ship left to even transport these materials to where they were needed, and even fewer shipyards to produce civilian vessels, let alone warships. The only facilities capable of producing warships were the Reyes-McLees shipyards of Mars and Reach. All others were confirmed destroyed or contact lost.

'If I do this right we can help our economy recover while building good relations with these aliens.' Denton thought. Knowing that simply shipping all the raw materials to the Hierarchy would be a massive undertaking. That could help boost the all too weak civilian section of the human economy (which had been struggling under the deprivations of a total war economy for decades only just started to recover from now).

"Perhaps once the situation is settled we can also open trade between our nations" Denton said. Knowing that if they could get the Citadel Races dependent on them for raw materials in the first place, then it would be easier to start charging them for such things once the reparations had been paid. Moreover, that kind of economic relationship between the UNSC and the Council Races would give humanity a great deal of influence over the Citadel Council (Denton knew that few governments would admit they could be manipulated through money, but he also knew that virtually all of them

were).

However, the Councilors had not attained their positions by being fools. So they didn't leap at the chance for trade like the human negotiator had been hoping. Instead Tevos simply said "we will examine that issue at a later date."

"There's still the issue of punishing those responsible for Impera" the turian Councilor continued coldly.

Denton sighed, "I can not make any guarantees or promises about them, but I can promise you that I will do my best to bring those responsible out into the light."

"That's not good enough!" Teranus snarled. In response Tevos put her hand on his shoulder and simply said his name.

"Teranus."

It was just one word but it managed to communicate so much. Teranus couldn't win this battle. He knew it, and the other Councilors knew it. Teranus simply didn't want to admit to himself that an entire world of his people had died and there was nothing that he could do to avenge them (at least right now).

However, childhood training and a lifetime of service had instilled a strong sense of duty in Teranus. He knew that as the Turian Councilor he had to put the welfare of his people above his own feelings and desires. So he simply remained silent, instead of demanding and ranting the way that he wanted to.

'Are they lovers?' Denton wondered. Surprised at the physical affection between two different species. The thought forming a strong mental image in his head. Then the negotiator told himself to get his mind out of the gutter and focus on the task at hand.

"So are these general terms for peace acceptable to you?" Denton asked, knowing that he needed the alien leaders at least nominally on board.

Despite his drugged state, the salarian Councilor was able to see the situation with a clarity his comrades lacked. The asari, krogan, and turian Councilors all knew that they should take the deal. But Wrex was too proud, Tevos was too cautious, and Teranus was too angry and bitter to be the first to say so. After another moment of awkward silence Vald'n stared at the human negotiator and replied "all things considered your terms are barely adequate...but they are acceptable."

In a traditional epic, things would have ended there. But real life is more complicated and messy than that. Denton and the Councilors spent the next hour arguing over the size of the concessions, the exact borders of UNSC and Council space, how to return POWs, and numerous other issues. Attempting to outline the form of the new relationship between the Citadel Council and humanity. Trying (at least on the human side) to ensure that this type of destructive conflict never happened again.

****APUFMKII****

Back aboard High Charity, the Councilors present were, for the first time since the Forerunner Oracle had spoken, stunned into silence. Only Thel and a few others already knew of the new species, but even they were stunned into silence. Not just by the eyewitness accounts from the two before them, but the news of what the humans had done. When Thel had loaned the small task force of ships to the humans, all he had known was that it would be used against these new species that had attacked the colony. Indeed he had agreed that these newcomers needed to be taught a lesson. But that meeting had been lacking in any details about just what had happened on the planet itself.

Now they knew. This new race had committed the same atrocities as they had during the height of the Great War. The execution, or rather slaughter, of civilians and in some cases, devouring them. Like the feral Unggoy and Kig-Yar that had been allowed with human prisoners. These new races were a complete unknown, nothing like them had been found by the Covenant in all its millennia, nor was there any information within the Forerunner archives they had access too.

Yet UNSC had shown no hesitation in destroying one of their heavily populated worlds for a battle that would have barely been a skirmish in the Great War. Destroying an entire planet just to intimidate the newcomers. Considering how they felt about the races that had made up the old Covenant—

"It's only a matter of time until the humans use such brutal methods against us" one of the Councilors stated, saying what everybody else at the meeting had been sent a glare in their general direction, but couldn't help but agree. He was one of the few on good terms with the humans, more so with their higher ranking leaders. But he was not blinded by faith and worship like he was before. He knew that there were among them, like there had been among the Old Covenant, those that are more brutal, close minded and ruthless than the others.

Since the Great War had ended, relations between the New Covenant and the UNSC/UEG had been tenuous at best, and fractured at worst. He along with several of the other Councilors tried to foster better relations with the humans, and tried to change the opinions of the people of the New Covenant, but these efforts always suffered setback after setback. Sabotage, assassinations, espionage, all this and more turned more and more of the New Covenant away from seeing the humans as the Children of the Forerunners and the Inheritors of their Legacy, and simply as another race among the stars. And some, as the enemy. Before all that, the humans were almost revered, but what good will they had gained by the Forerunners had long since been spent.

This would be the stroke that broke the Thorn beast's neck.

"Perhaps our old leaders were wrong to treat the humans as their enemies but they made them their enemies and the humans have remained so ever since regardless of any treaties...who among us has not lost at least one friend or family member to ONI since the war ended?" another Councilor added bitterly. A resounding roar of agreement echoed through the chamber.

"If ONI, no, if the humans are willing to destroy an entire world for what barely amounts to a skirmish against a new species, one that has only laid siege to a single planet, then what will become of us! We

who have burned scores of their worlds. I see no reason why they wouldn't turn these world-killers against us, and I see no longer see any reason why we should not finish the Campaign that we began decades ago!"

"Aye!" Another Councilor stood, drawing the attention of the rest. His White gold armor standing out in the relatively darkened chamber. "The humans have claimed to be the Children of our Gods, of the Forerunners, but this madness, this insanity, is not the Will of the Gods. It is their own petulance and greed that drives them! I say we finish what we started, and eradicate the blight that is the humans!" Again another roar of approval resounded, though it was considerably lesser than before.

"No, I will not stand for this!" Another Councilor rose as he yelled, his White gold armor streaked with lines of camo green, marking him as one of the more fervent supporters of the humans, "They are the Inheritors of the Mantle, we all heard the message from the Oracle itself! You would damn the ways of the Covenant, of our faith, simply for petty revenge?" Others began shouting their approval and their own arguments, and soon their opposition also joined the verbal fray. The noise in the chamber was deafening, it could barely be heard was being yelled. Some tried to quell the shouting, but it only added to the din.

"Enough!" Thel slammed his fist down onto the table, drawing the attention of all around him. The Arbiter drew his sword and shouted "haven't you all been listening...it doesn't matter if the humans deserve to be destroyed or not because we no longer have the strength to do so...and I will not allow a pack of fools to throw away our people's last chance for the sake of their anger and pride!"

The Councilors stared at Thel in shock, it was one thing to know intellectually how bad off the New Covenant had gotten, it was another to have Thel himself say that their nation was too weak to wage war.

"A war with the UNSC right now would destroy us...we need to focus on rebuilding and gathering allies who will not stab us in the back...THEN we can worry about things like revenge and wounded pride" Thel explained in more moderate tones. His powerful gaze daring any of the Councilors to disagree.

Slowly, one by one, each of them began to sit down, none of them willing to challenge the Kaidon of Clan Vadam, let alone the Arbiter of all people. Thankful, Thel relaxed. "But I agree, we can no longer be so lax against the humans as we have been. Changes must be made, our borders and our fleets strengthened, and, information must be gathered." As he said this, his gaze drifted over to the two sangheili youths before him. The two were a part of the UNSC armed forces, a growing trend among the new generation; the ones that were born after wars' end.

"And the ones who have only seen their own people rapidly decline as the humans rise" Thel realized, as he looked into their faces and saw none of the respect bordering on reverence that virtually all older sangheili gave him.

"I know you see greatness in the humans and weakness in your own people...but no matter what you do the humans will never truly accept

you...you will always be untrustworthy 'Elites' to them" Thel told them, deliberately using the human slang for his species.

The two youths looked towards each other, the female touching her side at the rapidly healing wound. They did not want to believe the Arbiter's words, because of the friends they had made, but they couldn't deny that they experienced far more hostility while in human space than kindness (even after proving themselves numerous times, both on and off the battlefield).

The pair kneeled, and spoke in unison, "What would you have us do, my Arbiter?"

****APUFMKII****

Denton resisted the urge to slap his hand and drag it across his face. Arguing with the Citadel Councilor was one of the most complicated and frustrating things he had ever done. It wasn't merely the fact that two of them (the krogan and asari Councilors) literally had centuries more experience than him at this sort of thing. There was also the fact that there was only one of him, and four of them on the other side. All with different grievances and priorities.

Then, of course there was the fact that the turian Councilor hated him. It was hard to read alien body language but something about the way Teranus looked at him told Denton that if it had just been between him and the turian, Teranus might have tried putting those sharp looking claws he had to use. However, due to his dealing with the Elites, Denton was used to negotiating with people who were much bigger and stronger than him, so it didn't phase the doctor that much.

'Although if the average turian feels the same way another war in ten or twenty years may be unavoidable' Denton thought.

As it was, the krogan seemed to be the easier of the two to handle. Since his behavior and negotiation style was a close comparison to the sangheili. In fact it was almost as though he was dealing with a sangheili. The two shared too many cultural traits. Denton internally shuddered at the thought of the Krogan being part of the Covenant. They already had living 'tanks' in the form of the Mklekgolo or the Hunters, add in the krogan and they were the ultimate shock force. Still, the krogan's age and experience was giving Denton a challenge.

As for the asari, well she was being a bigger headache than he thought possible. Throughout the entire negotiations, she had tried to take and keep control, trying to force the direction they would go. Her age and apparent experience didn't help, but what was made worse was how she tried to influence them with her body (more than once subtly thrusting her chest out as though trying to draw attention to her cleavage). And Denton wasn't even sure if she was consciously doing it or not. As it was, he was leaning more towards the latter.

The salarian Councilor was more of a mystery. Unlike the asari, his features were so alien it was hard to read his expressions. Moreover, his fast talking and jittery movements reminded Denton of somebody who was high. But he had been told by Mjolnir that such behavior was normal for salarians (who tended to do everything fast). Something

which seemed to worsen as time went on. Denton had tried to use ocular implants in order to understand the salarian's body language, but he was twitching so much it was though he was going through withdrawal.

Denton was getting tired, and wanted to ask for a recess, but he couldn't. If he did, that could make him, and the UNSC/UEG seem weak. It wasn't possible at this point to convince the Citadel Council that humanity was good, which was all the more reason the UNSC/UEG had to appear strong. Otherwise the Council Races might think that they could get away with retaliating for Impera in the (near) future.

He need to try and break the discussion away from its current stance. Try and find something that would either appease the Councilors, or cow at least one of them, while keeping the UNSC/UEG looking strong. He blinked as he felt his neural implant be connected to the Infinity's network. Mjolnir's voice filling his mind. 'Professor, I think I may have found something.'

'Unless its something that can help me right now, you better disconnect now.' He thought back, 'What is it?'

'I've been reading through the Codex these Citadel races have, and I've found a discrepancy and a correlation.' Information was sent to his ocular implants, which soon began posting images in Denton's 'sight'. 'These asari, there's something off about them. Their evolutionary pattern doesn't make sense, though I'll blame that on the Forerunner's playing around in their sandbox more than anything else, but that's not the problem. There's multiple points in history where the asari had a technological jump, a massive one, that shouldn't have been possible without at least a world war, and I've found too few conflicts to account for all the jumps.'

Denton smirked slightly, knowing where this could be headed, 'And the correlations you found?'

'The only ones I've found is when the Old Covenant began to take apart Forerunner artifacts and reverse-engineer them, and when humanity started to find the Forerunner archives. Compared to the asari, the level of jumps are similar, and I've not found any other similar instances anywhere else in their Codex.'

'It sounds like the asari have been hoarding Prothean artifacts' Denton thought.

"Madam Councilor I wonder if you could tell me more about the Council policy regarding Prothean relics" Denton asked the asari with a wicked grin.

Tevos was puzzled by this change in the conversation but answered politely enough "Of course...it's Council policy that any examples of Prothean technology discovered must be announced and shared with the other Council and Associate Races."

At least that was the official policy. In practice it often took the Associate Races years or even decades to gain access to any newly discovered Prothean technology. And the asari had been secretly keeping a working Prothean Beacon (perhaps the most valuable example of Prothean tech ever discovered) to themselves for their own benefit.

"I was just curious because it seems odd that your species has been able to advance so much more quickly than the other Council Races" Denton continued with that same shit eating grin on his face.

"We have some of the best scientists in the galaxy" Tevos calmly replied. Although inside she was panicking. Wondering if he could possibly know about the secret Prothean Beacon on the asari homeworld.

"Yes yes, perhaps you do. However, I must ask, what prompted your people to put so much effort into research and development? It must have been considerable for you to have produced such results in so little time. Even my own people did not advance so quickly without cost or reason. In fact, more often than not, the reason why we made such strides was because of conflict. Just two world wars and an arms race between two Superpowers catapulted my species from the basic internal combustion engine to space travel and silicon-based technologies in less than a century. It's almost as though you had the gods themselves working alongside you."

"All species are different Doctor...I'm sure there are many things in your society I would find remarkable...but as fascinating as this discussion is we should focus on the matter at hand" Tevos replied, suddenly just wanting the negotiations to be over and done with (to get away from this all too perspective human and his disturbing questions).

Denton frankly wanted to continue the questioning. Both because he was genuinely curious now and also because he was enjoying seeing his formerly aggressive opponent in these negotiations on the defensive. But he knew that that would be counterproductive so he simply said "of course madam Councilor...now I believe we were finalizing the exact borders between our two nations?"

Not trusting herself to accidentally say anything that this human could use against her, she simply nodded. Her plans to manipulate the human had backfired catastrophically. Instead of her leading him around like a love-struck turian, he had pressed her back against the metaphorical wall like a naive maiden on Omega. Utterly dominating the discussion. And worse yet, by all appearances, he knew about the Prothean Beacon on Thessia. And even if it was just a bluff, there was no way she was going to risk that secret getting out.

The sooner these negotiations were over the better, the other matriarchs had to be told. And perhaps she would contact Aethyta, something that she would not be looking forward to.

****APUFMKII****

They say timing is everything, and the UNSC AI Morrison, onboard and controlling the UNSC Valiant Class super-heavy cruiser the Everest, was about to prove that it had perhaps the worst timing in the galaxy.

The Citadel Council and Doctor Denton had signed a treaty mere moments ago. Officially bringing an end to armed conflict between the Council Races and humanity. The military forces of both sides had disengaged and drawn back, and the turians were in the process of

going through the procedures to release the Everest.

But nobody had bothered to tell Morrison that. As soon as all his systems were fully charged, the human soldiers inside who had been sleeping in cryopods, and had since been thawed, opened up the armies and let them loose against the intruders inside the Everest. The few turian technicians who were still inside the ship (taking the last of their equipment and some last minute scans) were no match for the angry, numerous, and extremely xenophobic soldiers (who were outraged to find aliens trespassing on their vessel), dying before they had a chance to figure out what was going on or even issue a warning.

Then the Everest violently burst out of the lunar bunker where it had been hidden, destroying the facility and killing everyone inside in the process. The appearance of the battlescarred vessels was so surprising, no reacted as ship forced its way from the lunar bunker. The old but still powerful weapons blasting the two closest turian warships out of the sky moments later.

Throughout the Palaven system, people were too shocked at the sudden appearance and violent actions of the Everest. Although there was one notable exception. Within the conference room where the Citadel Council, Doctor Denton, and Admiral De la Rosa were meeting.

Councilor Teranus had been pushed too far, seem too many of his people die, and had his pride hurt too much at this point to think at all clearly (this last attack after peace had been declared was simply too much). He began moving towards the human negotiator and admiral, intent on ripping out their throats with his bare hands. His predatory instinct and righteous fury completely in control.

All of the humans in the room were simply too shocked to react in time. But Wrex, with his centuries of battlefield experience saw what was about to happen. A big part of him would love to see these treacherous humans die, but he knew that that would restart a that his people simply couldn't win (not yet anyway).

A massive krogan fist met Teranus before the turian Councilor could reach the humans. Wrex's blowing knocking the male out and across the room.

'I really hope I didn't kill him' Wrex thought as he turned to the confused humans and thundered "Open a channel to everybody in the system...I need to address our fleets right away or the shooting will start once they get over the surprise."

"Wrex how could you-" Tevos started to say, only to be rudely interrupted by Wrex as the shouted "shut up woman I'm trying to save all our lives."

"All communications channel are open, Councilor Wrex, you can address everyone in the Palaven System, now" Mjolnir announced, choosing to comply with the Councilor's demand on its own initiative (because Wrex was obviously right).

"This is Councilor Wrex representing the Citadel Council...to all Council military forces...do not I repeat do not open fire...the human vessel that attacked is a rogue vessel that was acting on its own...the humans will be leaving the system now...empty handed and

without any prisoners."

Meanwhile, AIs throughout the human fleet were communicating with the Everest Explaining to Morrison (in seconds) the situation, just moments after the Everest had destroyed the two turian warships, and what exactly he had just done. Making the Everest's AI as close to being mortified as an artificial intelligence could get, with his emotion subroutines finally coming online.

Councilors Vald'n and Tevos also addressed the fleets too, telling Council forces not to attack and that the Everest was a rogue element acting on its own. Assuring everyone that the humans would be gone soon.

"Thanks Councilor Wrex you really saved us there I-" Denton started to say, only to be interrupted by a krogan fist to the face. Which admittedly hit him much less hard than Wrex had hit Teranus.

Energy snapped and crackled as cloaking fields disengaged and Spartans seemed to almost instantly appear in the room with weapons drawn. But Denton sprang to his feet and said "no no...I probably that coming...I'm sure Wrex isn't going to hit anybody else right now" as he clutched his broken nose. He had suffered far worse already, this was simply the latest of injuries as far as he was concerned. Each of the Spartans looked towards Denton who just nodded, lowering their weapons but staying in plain sight.

"I could have hit you hard enough to crush your skull...frankly you would have deserved it after breaking a treaty WE JUST FUCKING SIGNED...but I knew that would restart the war" Wrex replied stonily.

"Okay...we just need you to-" Admiral De la Rosa started to say, only to be interrupted by Wrex.

"NO...we are leaving now...Teranus needs medical attention...besides after this latest stunt I don't trust any of you hairy mammals as far as I can throw a dreadnought."

"What about the people you promised us...the ones responsible for the attack on Shanxi?" Denton asked as blood dripped from his face onto the floor, creating a pitiful image of a human specimen.

"We need to get back to our own people to look into that...but I'm sure that they probably died during one of your recent slaughters" Wrex answered.

Wrex was obviously not telling the truth, and everyone in the room knew it. But he wasn't actually trying to deceive anyone. Regardless of what the treaty said, there was no way the Citadel Council would be willing to turn over anyone else after this latest outrage.

The battlemaster glowered down at the humans, daring them to disagree with him. Daring them to scold him for violating the treaty after their side had so violently broken it.

"Yes...I'm sure they died in all the...confusion" Denton answered slowly. Internally he was furious, the Everest had just completely ruined everything he had done in a single moment. The UNSC/UEG would no longer have to worry about trying to appear strong, oh that much

was assured.

At that point the humans were actually eager to get the Councilors off the ship (Denton certainly didn't want the krogan Councilor to hit him again). The Spartans escorted the Councilors to one of the hangars where they called for and boarded a turian shuttle. As the shuttle departed the Era, the turian Councilor started to wake up, staring ahead himself blearily.

"What...what hit me?" Teranus muttered drowsily.

"I did Teranus...sorry about that...I couldn't let you kill the little bastards" Wrex explained, not including the fact that the four of them had apparently been surrounded since the negotiations began.

"WHY WOULD YOU DEFEND THEM!...THEY MURDERED IMPERA AND BROKE THE TREATY AS SOON AS THEY SIGNED IT! the turian Councilor shouted, shocked completely awake by Wrex's words.

"Because we were losing..the trashed our shipyards and planets and we barely scratched their paint jobs" Wrex said grimly.

The words seemed to deflate Teranus, because he knew that the krogan was right. So he slumped down and said bitterly "so those oathbreakers are just going to get away with it?"

"No..I promise you my friend that even if it take a century I will make these treacherous little bastards pay for what they've done today...they have better weapons now...but as soon as that situation changes...then they will be at OUR mercy" the battlemaster proclaimed. And something about the way he said it made everybody in the shuttle believe him.

Please review!

A/N: I'm disregarding the Arbiter from Halo Wars as it does not make sense to me as to why there would be an Arbiter as in Halo 2, Truth said that each Arbiter is created during times of crisis. And until the loss of Installation 04(Alpha Halo), the Covenant suffered no real crises. In fact, I may disregard Halo wars entirely.

Also, Denton's character, the good doctor may seem to be behaving childishly throughout all this, but there is a

14. Fragile Peace: Three Years Later

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk II

Co-written with aDarkOne

A/N: Well it seems most of you are unhappy with how the last chapter ended. If not the last scene itself, which may undergo an edit/rewrite later on as I talk with my co-writer if it has not already by the time of this posting, but the wording only, and not the peace itself.

And to those of you who think humanity is just rolling over I say this, Cold War, Proxy War, Shadow War, Arms Race.

Also, keep in mind something: not everything is what it seems.

Leave a review!

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Chapter 14

"_Si vis pacem, para bellum" _

It has been three years since First Contact between the UNSC/UEG and the Citadel Council and its associate races. Three years since a tentative peace treaty was signed between the two governments, and the destruction of the turian fortress world of Impera.

Things have changed since then. The galaxy is no longer as it once appeared to be.

The UNSC/UEG has grown massively since then. The economy growing steadily over the past three years, colonies had been reclaimed, industries rebuilt and grown. The UNSC Naval fleet has grown by leaps and bounds, its Army and Marine corps upgraded and the CDF expanded considerably. On the homefront, things have never looked better for humanity since the days before the First Insurrection. The vast spending by the UEG to return to its pre-war state, has been augmented by the Star charts taken from the Citadel races, with slipspace courses being plotted to new stars instead of blind jumps to the nearest stars in hopes of finding new worlds or waiting for astronomers to find them.

For the New Covenant, the situation has remained unchanged. Completing what few ships they still had in their shipyards, trying to teach a new generation of engineers and mechanics. The degradation of their fleet may have yet to begin, but as it stands, it appears to be inevitable. Civil unrest has begun to spread as a schism begins to fracture the New Covenant again. Between those that would stay allied with the humans, and those that would cut all ties with them permanently. Others have left the Covenant and High Charity entirely, returning to their homeworlds or choosing to go on their own paths.

As for the Citadel Races, things have changed immensely. The Treaty of Farixen has long since been disbanded. Military buildup and spending has reached unprecedented heights, surpassing that of the Rachini wars. Mass Relay exploration has restarted. New Relays are being activated, worlds discovered, colonized and resources exploited. The economy has grown by leaps and bounds by the new spending and influx of resources. Augmented by the resources the UNSC/UEG as part of their reparations. Reparations that have only so much longer before it ends.

Security among the Citadel races has reached paranoid levels and on the various homefronts, fears of a human campaign of conquest are present, along with a hatred of humanity. A hate that will soon begin to grow.

Both symbolizing and strengthening this hatred is the political group the Sons of Impera. The Sons were originally founded after the war by survivors of Impera who were off world when the planet was destroyed.

Since then ten of thousands of people who had lost friends and family to UNSC soldiers and weapons had joined the group (with more joining every day). The Sons are a political action group that uses tactics such as nonviolent protest, online petitions, and working to get politicians sympathetic to the cause elected, in order to push their anti-human agenda. The group had had some success.

Using its influence to kill legislation in Citadel Council member states that would have expanded diplomatic ties and/or trade with the EUG, encouraging all member nations to increase military spending to guard against the human menace, and pressuring everyone to have as little contact with humanity as possible.

Yet it still wasn't enough for the leadership of the Sons of Impera. The founders (who occupied most of the top leadership positions) genuinely hated the UNSC (and in many cases the human species itself). It wasn't enough to protect themselves from human influence and aggression. They wanted some way to strike back at those who had destroyed their world and killed their loved ones.

"The problem is that the human reparations are making too many of our own people rich" Pallin Jared, the chairman of the Sons governing board said mournfully as he addressed the rest of the board, pacing through their inner sanctum (inside their headquarters on Palaven).

"And my own people think we can just wait the damn humans out" replied the asari treasurer Treeya Nyxeris bitterly. Because unlike most matriarchs, she had no patience when it came to the humans. Having lost all her daughters and most of her granddaughters when Impera was destroyed.

"We should target all the traitors who collaborate with the humans!" shouted Chazzik Jaroth, the only salarian on the governing board.

The chairman was thinking hard as the rest of the board started to argue. Pallin Jared had been a nobody who had just drifted from job to job until Impera was destroyed. But his hatred had given him focus, allowing a surprisingly sharp (and very bitter) mind to shine through.

"BE QUIET" the turian bellowed, instantly ending all the arguing.

"If we go after collaborators now that will just destroy our popularity and if we're unlucky get us labelled a criminal enterprise...what we really need to do is show the public that the humans are still a threat...that they are or soon will take further action against us" the chairman explained.

"I think I can help with that" one of the other turians on the governing board replied.

Once she had everybody's attention, Abrudas Acton (the group's head of Public Relations) smiled in her turian way and said "tell me...have any of you heard of the Office of Naval Intelligence?"

****APUFMKII****

While some have enjoyed the benefits of the growing Cold War between the UNSC/UEG and the Citadel Races, others have suffered a reversal of fortune because of it.

The Quarian Migrant Fleet had been particularly hard hit. Thanks to steadily increasing military spending and ever tighter security throughout Council space, the Migrant Fleet had been pushed further and further to the edges of civilized space. Even the relatively lawless Terminus Systems were becoming less welcoming to the Quarians. As many of the warlords, independent colonies, criminal cartels, and mercenary companies that called the area home increased military spending and patrols of their territory in response to Citadel Council militarization.

Because of all these factors, the situation had gone from bad to worse for the Quarians. Making it harder for Quarians to go on Pilgrimages (and harder to come back to the Migrant Fleet after they did), harder for the Fleet to find welcoming (or at least tolerating) territory to travel to, and especially hard to find all the raw materials and other resources the Fleet needed to function.

Their only saving grace were the new relays as the Council fleets began exploring again for the first time in millennia (at least, those that they could find unguarded). The paranoia of the Council meant that each Relay was guarded by a task force that was dwarfed only by the Citadel Defense Fleet and the fleets guarding the Council Race homeworlds in terms of sheer numbers (except for the Migrant Fleet itself of course).

But the Migrant Fleet's luck might have just changed. They had stumbled upon a Mass Relay that wasn't recorded in any (known) Council databases, which meant that it had yet to have been activated by the Council. Once they had activated the Primary-type Mass Relay, they prayed to their ancestors for good news. And receive it they did. The automated probes that they had just sent through confirmed that it led to an uninhabited and lifeless system full of natural resources. Including wreckage from what appeared to be a large battle that had occurred long ago.

Of course there was the obvious risk of stumbling upon an apparently much more advanced race, if the scans of the planet, which showed signs of weaponized plasma usage. Much like the 'humans' they had been hearing rumors of for the past three years. And the added risk of being found by a Council fleet. With the paranoia running rampant in the present time, few were willing to risk prosecution, which in all likelihood, would lead to execution.

"It doesn't matter if the Council would execute us all for using the Relay or not at this point...without raw materials and a chance to rest in a friendly system for a few months hundreds of civilian ships will start falling apart soon" Admiral Zaal'Koris vas Qwib Qwib said as he addressed the rest of the Admiralty Board.

"Nevertheless we couldn't defend ourselves from the Council Races if they choose to retaliate...even our military ships are in disrepair now" Admiral Han'Gerrel vas Neema informed his colleagues.

"I for one however, am not as eager as the rest of you are to see what is on the other side of the Relay." Daro'Xen vas Moreh said,

drawing attention to herself as they would expect her to be the most ardent supporter for the journey. "My teams have analyzed the probe data extensively. Whatever created that graveyard of ships are both incredibly advanced and incredibly powerful. Both the wrecks and the planet show extensive damage resulting from high-heat weapons, most likely plasma. And as everyone here knows, the only race to ever weaponize plasma are the Geth. Factor in how much of the planet's surface was scorched clean, and the size of the wrecks..." She let the sentence hang, the implications obvious and disconcerting.

"It may no longer be a matter of choice. My patrols have reported that more civilian ships have been making passages through the Secondary-type relay in the system. It may be only a matter of time before someone reports our presence here and that information makes it back to the Citadel." Shala'Raen vas Tonbay told them. "Our presence is still unknown to others for now but that state will not remain for much longer."

Then she sighed and admitted "the truth is...we can't stay here and have nowhere else to go."

"Perhaps we could make a deal with a Terminus warlord?" Admiral Daro'Xen suggested with unusual meekness.

"We've already tried that...the only ones that seem open to the idea are the ones that would sell us out to the Council as soon as they asked" the leader of the Heavy Fleet said bitterly.

"Do we have any friends left in Council space?" Daro'Xen asked.

Zaal'Koris shook his head. "No, I've been compiling reports from among the captains; the most recent of those that have returned from the pilgrimages have said that the discrimination against quarians has worsened. So much so that it is worse than how our ancestors were treated immediately following the Morning War. The fear caused by these 'humans' has made the idea of pilgrimage near infeasible."

Disbelief shook the other three Admirals to the core, Pilgrimage, the quarian's right of passage, was one of the few, good, constants still left among their people. For it to be infeasible. it was unbelievable, but with how society was now, it was a cold hard truth.

"Perhaps we could...appeal to the humans?" Daro'Xen replied quietly. The normal brash and uncouth admiral was being unusually meek, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the other admirals. In context though, it was understandable. An incident during one of her 'special projects' to understand and control the geth had backfired terribly. Few knew the details but whatever had happened had humbled the once proud (and some would say arrogant) scientist.

At which Han'Gerrel vas Neema simply laughed bitterly. Saying "they destroyed a heavily populated world just to make a point...imagine what they would do to people like us...who can't fight back against an interstellar empire worth a damn at all?"

"And I've heard rumors that they did that just to retaliate for the Council capturing a single ship of theirs" Han'Gerrel added.

"None of it matters as it's not our decision to make at all."
Rael'Zorah said, speaking for the first time since the meeting had begun. "The decision to go through this Relay will affect every single man, woman and child in the fleet. And any of our people scattered throughout the galaxy. This is a decision to be made by the Conclave."

"The Conclave? Are you mad Rael?! The people are already frightened enough as it is, and you want to drop this on them? What are you thinking?" Zaal shouted, the normal calm admiral being outraged by such an idea. The Conclave was when the decision was left to the people of the Migrant Fleet, a majority decision made by representative's for all the ships of the Fleet. "I--"

"No...Rael has a point...this is a decision for the Conclave"
Daro'Xen stated, speaking with the confidence that her colleagues had come to expect from her. But in truth, the admiral was just trying to delay. Hoping that she could come up with a better solution in the near future.

When Zaal looked towards Han and Shala for support, they simply nodded; assenting to what Rael said. Zaal slumped in his chair in defeat. "So, what do we do then?" He asked.

"Reports. We need to give the Conclave as much information as we can before they make their decision. That means the status of our ships, our supplies and Xen's analysis. Better they know the risks if we go or if we stay." Rael listed.

"I will inform the captains and begin the other necessary preparations for the Conclave" the leader of the civilian fleet said dejectedly. Normally he promoted the influence of the civilians, both because he felt it was just, and to increase his own status. But this time Zaal'Koris was afraid that their fear would make them reject the unknown in favor of the familiar, regardless of how awful (and unlivable) what they already had was becoming.

****APUFMKII****

On the other side of the coin, within the Epilison Eradini system, in orbit of the planet of Reach, the shipyards were alight with activity. Not an uncommon sight considering everything that had happened to humanity over the decades. Freighters, civilian shuttles, automated cargo transports and of course the warships had been pouring off the assembly lines the moment people could enter orbit and grab their tools. The planet itself had since recovered from its near Fall during the Great War, once again a bustling colony world and the most heavily fortified human planet, second only to Earth.

One shipyard in particular however, stood out from the rest. Capital-class shipyard Theta Foxtrot Twenty-one Beta. This one was separated from the rest; placed above the northern pole of the planet. The half-constructed ships within finally beginning to receive its hull-plating and soon its weapons. Watching it with a close eye was administrator Derek Hardison. Observing as his engineers double checked the frames before the armor plating was added.

Like many humans Derek Hardison had indirectly benefited from first contact with the Citadel Council.

Before First Contact the UNSC had actually been slowing military construction, due to the disappearance of the Covenant, and the fact that the rapidly weakening New Covenant didn't appear to be a threat. Leaving people such as Derek Hardison (who had expected to find a job within the military industrial complex straight out of college) in a difficult position.

But then the UNSC had made violent First Contact with the Citadel Council. Which turned out to be the largest, most powerful, and aggressive interstellar coalition that they had met since the Covenant. Forcing the human nation to militarize more rapidly than it had since the Great War. As a result, they had to hire legions of scientists, engineers, and technicians (i.e. people like Hardison) in order to rebuild and build up, their fleet of warships.

The civilian sector of the economy benefited too. As mining ships, freighters, and other civilian transports were organized to ferry the vast amounts of raw materials that the United Earth Government had agreed to pay the Council Races (particularly the Turian Hierarchy) as reparations for the destruction of Impera and the other worlds wrecked by the UNSC during its brief violent conflict with the Citadel species.

In truth, the reparations were to a large extent simply an excuse to organize a large proportion of the civilian economy around a (somewhat) non-military project, and to establish a presence near the edge of the UNSC border with Council Races, in the form of military bases, colonies, and factories (producing military and consumer goods).

However, regardless of the reasons or causes, that meant more money, jobs, and overall prosperity for trillions of people like Derek Hardison. Something the administrator could certainly appreciate as his teams of engineers told him that they had met the requirements for their latest deadline ahead of schedule.

"Its almost a shame that they're never gonna get used" Hardison told his chief engineer as he looked out upon the half built fleet of capital ships.

"What do you mean Derek?" asked Linda Danvers, as she stroked his hair.

The administrator smiled, technically it was against the rules for him to sleep with his subordinates. But as long as he didn't flaunt it and delivered results, nobody cared if he and his chief engineer were lovers or not. So Derek and Linda had had a very good professional and personal working relationship for the past two years.

"Well its just...the Council Races are too primitive to challenge us as long as we have a decent number of warships and what's left of the Covenant gets weaker every day...as soon as we fully master this 'Mass Effect' technology we'll be running the galaxy" Derek explained.

"Assuming everything goes according to plan" Linda thought.

What made the warships they were building at Theta Foxtrot Twenty-one Beta so special was that they had Mass Effect engines. That should (assuming all the technical issues had been worked out) allow the vessels to travel faster than light in realspace. But nobody had built warships with ME FTL engines as big as the ones Hardison and his people were constructing.

The Council Races said it couldn't be done. That vessels as big as his capital ships would rip themselves apart if you tried to manipulate their mass that way. But humans like Derek and Linda were betting that they were wrong. That superior construction and power generation would make the crucial difference.

"You really think that they will work as advertised?" Linda asked as she stared outside at the half built fleet.

"Of course...we beat the Covenant and took their technologyâ€¦we beat the Council Races and took their tech...now its smooth sailing for all us homo sapiens" Derek Hardison stated confidently. Sure that the work that he was doing now would lead to more career advancements such as raises, more titles, and perhaps even a promotion.

"It probably won't hurt my ability to attract the ladies either" Derek thought. Wondering if there was a polite way to ask Linda if she would be open to a threesome. And if he could dump her for a hotter woman assuming that she wasn't.

"Do you think that the ships they're building at the 23rd will steal any of our thunder?" Linda thought aloud.

"You mean the flying tanks...hell no...combat is all about speed now...Slipspace gives us the strategic edge...and all this new technology will give us the tactical edge...we will literally be able to fly rings around everybody else" the administrator said contemptuously.

But the chief engineer wasn't so sure. Instead of focusing on speed, the warships they were building at UNSC shipyard Theta Foxtrot Twenty-three Beta focused on heavy armor and superior firepower at a relatively short range. As a way of countering the ability of the Council Race warships to make short FTL jumps to attack enemy vessels at point blank range.

These flying tanks as the administrator called them, were officially labelled as battleships by the UNSC. They shared a similar design to that of a modern cruiser, but with more than a few differences, one of them being the thicker armor. The biggest features of the battleships was the, or rather, lack thereof, of its MAC gun. In place of the spinal cannon(s) inherent in all almost all UNSC ship designs, it had instead four massive turrets, two on each side of the ship, with each turret having four sixteen-inch Jericho cannons. The design and function of the new class was only theoretical so just a few of the 'tanks', a dozen at most, were currently being built.

"I think they might actually be of some use." Linda tried to argue. "I mean, every other ship is made thinking we're going to be fighting the Innies or the Covies. Half the time the battles were just a slugging match across a couple of thousand miles. These new guys are practically ramming into each other every time they fight. I mean,

did you hear what they did at Shanxi three years ago?"

The administrator snorted. "Please, that was the CDF and we weren't prepared. We didn't know what to expect so they got the drop on us. It's not like they'll ever manage it again. With all these new ships, they won't even get a chance to get that close anymore. With these babies," referring to the mass effect drive equipped vessels, "even if do manage to get that close, all we have to do is just 'jump' away and hammer them back into the stone age. And besides, you think they're going to be stupid enough to try anything like that again after what we did? They'd have to be brain-dead or suicidal to even think of it."

Linda didn't bother pointing out the contradiction in her administrator's last statement. The man brought up more than a few good points but still...she couldn't help but feel that the new battleships will prove to be more valuable than Derek thought they would be.

'Besides...I know if aliens showed up and destroyed one of our heavily populated worlds we would take a long time to forgive them...that's why so many people still hate the Elitesâ€|and If they spend long enough thinking about ways to really hurt us they're bound to eventually figure out a way to do it', Linda thought.

But Derek was still her boss. Besides, he was handsome, somewhat witty, and more than half decent in the sack. Even if he was an arrogant asshole. So Linda let the matter drop and said "I suppose you're right, Derek."

****APUFMKII****

Among the three Galactic superpowers, The New Covenant possessed what was still perhaps the largest and most powerful fleet of warships in known space. But unlike the human and Council fleets which were rapidly expanding, it only seemed to diminish in size. A reality that weighed heavily on the Arbiter's mind as he listened to the latest intelligence report on the Citadel Council and UNSC.

According to scouts and Special-Operations troops that were in Council space, the number of warships possessed by the Citadel races had grown tenfold. And it showed no signs of stopping anytime soon. With the Council constantly opening up new Relays to unexplored systems providing a boon to their own economy, and the vast majority of the raw materials being sent by the humans as 'reparations' being dedicated, if the reports were to be believed, straight to the foundries and from there to the shipyards.

It was a similar story with their armies: all of the Citadel races had poured Gods knows how much in resources into expanding their standing armies. There were no exact figures to support the intel but considering the increase in the number of active warships, someone was obviously crewing them.

The only good news out of all this was that what few civilians that chose to enter Citadel space were not met with hostility, but for the most part they were meet with relative kindness. The politeness one could expect when introducing themselves for the first time. There was even trade between the two economies, though most plasma-based technologies, including energy shielding, were strictly

denied.

Because even though the leaders of the New Covenant would never admit it, the Citadel races industries and scientific community were so much larger and healthier than their own, that if the Council Races gained access to Covenant technology, they would probably soon become even more powerful militarily than the New Covenant had ever been.

That was the good news, at least compared to the reports on the humans.

The report was incredibly flimsy, a testament to the better security of the humans. The Citadel races may have been far more paranoid than the humans, but they lacked the ability to detect or even recognize the presence of active-camouflage and null-sig technology. That was the theory at least. Either that or they were incompetent than previously thought.

The UNSC had since recovered their losses, least in terms of ships, since the events from three years ago. However, some were still waiting for a crew while most were crewed by green and untested sailors and graduates. Not that any of this was news to him, having already learned of it some time ago from his meetings with the human Lord Hood, one of the few humans Thel still associated with. He even knew why most of the crews were inexperienced when he knew for a fact that there were currently less veterans serving now than before.

Hood and most of the UNSC leadership had dishonorably discharged or reassigned many of the crews and captains of the ships that went mad, or AWOL as the humans called it, during the Impera Event, which most humans called that day from three years ago. Hood said he didn't want to discharge that many men and women but said the UNSC had to send a message that that sort of behavior would not be tolerated. They had even handed over the captain, and the majority of her crew, that was responsible for the Impera Event, over to the Citadel Council. At least, that was what Thel had been told. What news that came from Citadel space seemed only to support it (their execution was highly publicized).

"But I doubt those treacherous murderers would have turned over their own so readily...I wonder just what was really executed on the Citadel that day?" Arbiter Thel asked himself.

But the truth was, that was actually not his problem. And the Arbiter had far more pressing concerns. The majority of the report came from the agents within the UNSC/UEG territories. Outside of the fleets, there seemed to be several secret projects in the works, that their agents' had caught glimpses of during their regular duties. These agents were not sure of exactly what they had seen, but they could confidently state that it involved a vast amount of resources.

However, the biggest piece of intel did not apparently relate to any of that. As his agents took note of a significant number of human personnel, AIs, and ships that seemed to simply disappear. Rumors ranged from a secret mission to an experiment gone wrong. But circumstantial evidence indicated it was none of those things.

It seemed that a small sect had gone AWOL (or possibly even turned traitor). What the reason was, they hadn't found out, but all signs pointed to the AIs being the cause. Something had happened that was enough to divide the normally unified AIs on a massive scale. So much so that even outsiders like the New Covenant had been to pick up the signs, and it appeared that whatever was going on the process seemed to be accelerating. The Arbiter had ordered his agents to seek out any more information they could find on these mysteries, but as it was he deeply suspicious of the anything the humans said or did that didn't serve a clear purpose and obvious end.

"Your Eminence...the humans have once again offered their assistance in repairing our fleet" one of Thel's aids reported dutifully.

The Arbiter made a noise of disgust as he threw aside the official forms that required his approval and began to pace his inner sanctum. Knowing that he couldn't trust any human agency or corporation not to further sabotage his warships and ship building facilities.

Knowing that even if most of the humans involved in such a project were sincere (a very big if), ONI's still wanted to see his kind weakened (if not outright wiped out), and unfortunately ONI's influence among the humans was so great that he couldn't trust any large group of humans near his shipyards. Either there were humans sympathetic to ONI's ideals among the workers, or outright ONI agents among them.

"Perhaps the Council Races could help us rebuild" one of Thel's advisors suggested.

"No...they are already our superiors in numbers and raw industry...if we expose them to our technology they will become our superiors in everythingâ€|especially if we become dependent on them to fix our machines" the Arbiter explained.

"A thousand apologies, milord." The advisor bowed lower, only further exasperating Thel. Not wanting or needing yes-men, but rather people who would tell their superior when he was mistaken or just plain wrong.

"Do not apologize for fulfilling your role as my military advisor...I need people with initiative and ideas...you're useless to me if you don't ever question what were doing" Thel said patiently.

"Then milord...can we to turn down the humans aid...or not seek help from the Council Races?" the advisor asked with a touch more steel in his voice.

"Perhaps not...but the fact remains we cannot trust either of other great powers in our moment of weakness...if we let the galaxy see how truly vulnerable we are our people are doomed...but we may have no other choice" the leader of the sangheili people confessed.

In his heart, Thel did something he had not done for many years, he prayed.

****APUFMKII****

Back amongst the Migrant Fleet, the final preparations were being made to hold a special session of the Conclave aboard one of the Live

Ships. As Admiral Zaal'Koris mentally rehearsed what he was going to say to the people who represented all the ships and crews in the Flotilla.

Like Zaal'Koris all the other admirals were nervous. Although the only one who showed it was Shala'Raam, who seemed to be compulsively fidgeting. While Han'Gerrel, Daro'Xen, and Rael'Zorah simply stood in place. Waiting for the fleet's delegates.

Earlier the Admirals had discussed how they would break the news to the people, along with, at the present time, preparations were being made for either decision of the Conclave.

They had chosen Koris as the civilian fleet made up the vast majority of the Migrant Fleet, along with the fact that out of all them, he held the greatest trust among the people. "Well Koris, almost everyone is here, are you ready?" Gerrel asked, despite not showing it, he was equally nervous as the others. His time in the Migrant Marine Corps kept it in check.

"Don't remind me Han, I'm already nervous enough as it is." For Zaal, the constant stresses of dealing with the never ending problems in the fleet, had taught him how to keep a cool appearance, even if it were a facade.

As the delegates assembled in the gigantic chamber that served as the location for the Conclave, the admiral of the Civilian Fleet managed keep a grip on himself (barely). Knowing that the next few minutes could change all of their lives. Hoping his people could be as wise and brave as he had always claimed they were.

Among the delegates themselves, there was an air of anxiety and worry. They knew that the situation was desperate for the Flotilla right now, but only a few truly understood, or even knew, just how desperate the situation really was. And this special session of the Conclave just made them more nervous, knowing that such a thing would only be called in response to an emergency.

Once all the delegates had gathered the leader of the Heavy Fleet asked for silence, and after things had quieted down Zaal'Koris rose to address the group. Roughly fifty thousand sets of eyes looked upon him as he began to speak.

"My friends our situation is dire...the Council Races and their lackeys become less welcoming and more hostile by the day...our children's Pilgrimages become ever more perilous...and new species such as humanity have appeared to threaten us too...we cannot stay in Council space and the Terminus Systems are even more dangerous...but fate has given us a unique opportunity."

The admiral stopped speaking for a moment, both to gather his thoughts and make sure that he had everybody's full attention.

"As you are all by now aware, since entering this system, we have activated a dormant relay; granting us access to a region both untouched and unknown the Council. But there is something else. Something that we have found on the other side." Here Zaal looked towards Xen, to see if she wanted to speak for herself. The Special Projects director shook her head no. "On the other side of the Relay we have found evidence that another race may hold claim to the

territory. A race both immensely powerful and technologically advanced, one with the power to burn entire worlds to ash and whose smallest ships outmass most of our own. I will not lie to you, our species is at a crossroads: either we stay and face the prosecution of the Council, or we leave and pray we find some form of salvation."

"Could the aliens be the humans?" someone in the crowd shouted.

"If the Ancestor's were only so kind, they would be. But no, they are most likely not. Whatever this unknown race may be, they have mastered the art of plasma to a scale that any of us can scarcely comprehend. One of the worlds we found had its surface burned to glass and its oceans vaporized. I do not need to remind you the only other ones to ever use plasma in their weapons have been the Geth."

Whispers began breaking out among the assembled captains, but before it could grow out of control, Zaal spoke again "now that I have told you what faces us on the other side side of the Relay my colleague Han'Gerrel vas Neema will tell you what we face in known space."

The admiral of the Heavy Fleet moved forward as he addressed the delegates. Admiral Han'Gerrel wasn't a great public speaker, but he spoke confidently, and as the closest thing the Migrant Fleet had to minister of war, his words carried weight.

"Ever since the destruction of Impera the Council Races have been building up their fleets...before then we were too weak to defeat them the Migrant Fleet was large and powerful enough that anyone but the leader of the Hierarchy himself would be hesitant to start a real shooting war with us...but now even the Associate Races are constructing warships in large numbers...unless something big changes sooner or later our relative military strength will be nothing compared to any of them...and after that once a fight breaks out...and it WILL break out now that the Council Races are more hostile than ever...we will be wiped out."

"What about the Terminus Systems?" a female delegate asked.

"Many of them are militarizing too...and the truth is my own Heavy Fleet is falling into disrepair thanks to lack of raw materials to fix them...we can't win a war with any interstellar power right now...and after the humans upset the balance of power everybody seems to be itching for a fight" the admiral admitted.

This time the frightened whispers did break out en masse. Fear permeating the air, as most those present were civilians and outside of the occasional pirate and slaver attacks, had never any real reason to fear for their lives, their families or their crews.

Zaal'Koris gestured to the leader of the Patrol Fleet to speak up, knowing that their argument would be more persuasive if all the admirals seemed to be in agreement.

"But fear notâ€¦not all the news is bad...the system on the other side of the Relay is full of natural resources and advanced technology that we can salvage...moreover it appears to have been abandoned for quite some time...its clear to we that the previous

owners enemies wrecked the system until it was useless to them" Shala'Raen stated.

Then Rael'Zorah spoke up. He had the least seniority of all the admirals, and was theoretically the least powerful (commanding a relative few ships from the civilian and special projects fleet). But he was ambitious, charismatic and, some said was more intelligent than Daro'Xen, coupled with his thoughts that the Quarian people had a great destiny made him the more politically powerful on the Admiralty board. .

"I know many of you are afraid of what we may face on the other side. I know that many of you would rather stay with what you know and remember, but we must consider not only ourselves, but our children. I would face the unknown if only for the chance that my daughter may eventually have a family of her own, than have her stay and perhaps die before she has the chance."

Zaal'Koris wanted the last word, but he honestly couldn't think of anything to say better than what Rael'Zorah just had, so he decided to call for the vote.

The question, should we go through the Mass Relay or stay in explored territory?

Because the vote was done electronically (with the delegates using their omni-tools to submit their vote) the actual voting took only a few minutes. But the customary process of digitally double checking the results (so that no one could question it afterward) took about an hour. Even longer than usual because nobody wanted the results of this particular vote questioned.

Many people are afraid of the unknown so roughly 38% voted in favor of staying in familiar territory. But the Quarian people weren't stupid, and knew that their situation was desperate. So the majority voted to take the Migrant Fleet through the (previously dormant) Mass Relay.

The process of readying for the transition had already been completed by the Admirals before the meeting had begun, but the transition itself of fifty thousand plus ships would take weeks. But at least now, hope was alive.

****APUFMKII****

The Oort cloud was once where the UNSC had constructed the first of the INF-class ships, the Infinity, now renamed the Era of Retaliation, back when it seemed the war would be lost. Now it was the location of the INF shipyards and other secret projects. And currently the docking point for the ONI stealth cruiser UNSC Point of No Return.

The vessel was one that was so heavily classified that it didn't exist on any records, few had ever seen the ship, and fewer still served onboard. To that end, the entire installation and all the shipyards were deserted: everyone there had been relocated temporarily almost two weeks ago.

All because of two certain individuals who possessed far more clout than some thought they should. A fact that Parangosky hated to show,

but it was easy enough. She had swallowed her pride often enough during the Great War. That was she, and several others were currently heading towards the most secure waiting room in the Oort Cloud, as opposed to waiting for the two individuals to come to them. Following her were Rear Admiral Ned Rich and Captain Aaron G. Gibson, the ONI Covert Ops and Black Ops divisions leaders respectively. The three of them rarely met in person like this, the last time had been when Colonel James Ackerson, god rest his soul, had come to them to propose his Spartan-III project. The man was seen as arrogant, short-sighted and self-centered before his death. He had proved them all wrong during the Heretic Wars, but that was the past. She had to focus on the here and now, and why she had agreed to these conditions.

Her two subordinates didn't speak at all, there not being a point since they also knew why they were here. As they reached their destination, a pair of double doors opened, closing shut immediately after they had entered. Parangosky vaguely noted how the room was designed like the Odin's Eye on board the Point of No Return before focusing her attention on the two already waiting for them. Alan Morgan Denton and Catherine Elizabeth Halsey. Possibly the only people in all of human space that she both would rather stay from at all times, but keep them alive at all costs (after Terrence Hood).

Alan was leaning back in his chair, acting carefree as he always did. While Halsey had her fingers wrapped around a still steaming cup of coffee. "Good afternoon Margaret." Catherine greeted them as they took their seats opposite from the two scientists. She took a sip from her cup, "To what do I owe the pleasure of such a meeting like this?"

"Yeah Margie, what's so important that you actually bent over backwards to meet with us?" Denton said, trying to provoke the woman he so adamantly believed was the reason for his many near death experiences over the years, despite what anyone said. He leaned forward and onto the table. "I mean, must be something big that you left your throne and brought your two dogs with you." Alan looked over to the two 'dogs' in question. "Woof woof." He taunted them, or least tried to. Gibson had his arms crossed and was glaring at Alan while Ned had simply drawn his flask and uncapped it before taking a decent pull from it.

"Alan, could we please not antagonize them?" Halsey chided. "I actually am interested in what they have to say."

Alan pouted before he leaned back. "Aw, youre no fun Lizzie. Fine, I'll behave."

Margaret sighed internally in relief. "Thank you Catherine, as for the reasons why I agreed to this." She activated her omnitool, the Citadel technology had spread far and wide in the UNSC since First Contact almost three years ago, before forwarding several data packets to the pair of them.

"I want your analysis of this data...keep in mind it concerns the continued existence of the UEG itself" the head of ONI said solemnly.

Denton and Halsey looked over the intelligence reports ONI had

gathered on the nations in Council space on their own Omnitools. Drawing the (to them) obvious conclusions. But considering the gravity of the situation, they double-checked their data. Reaching the same awful conclusion.

"This data...is it accurate? Are you trying to be funny here?" Denton asked, his usual irrelevant and carefree manner disturbingly absent. "I'm all for jokes, but this one isn't funny Margaret." Using the ONI head's full name for once.

"The data is as accurate as possible—what are your findings?" Admiral Parangosky asked coldly.

"War between us and the Batarian Hegemony is inevitable" Doctor Halsey replied bluntly, her eyes not having left the reports.

"Why...surely they realize we would crush them?" the head of ONI said with justified confidence.

"Yes...they would stand no chance against us...but thanks to all the settlements and bases we have set up since the war with the Citadel Council, the batarians are right on our border," Denton explained, his hand now covering his eyes. "...and their dogmatic ideology and society is completely dominated by the notion that their racially superior to everybody else and a might makes right philosophy—" He sighed, leaning back into his chair. "Add in their tendency to raid and enslave their neighbors, the batarians overall military aggression, and its only a matter of time until we provoke them or they provoke us into a shooting war." He finished, speaking as though he were a teacher addressing a class.

"Do you agree?" Parangosky asked as she turned to Doctor Halsey, something she had rarely ever done..

"Unfortunately yes...those four-eyed slavers remind me of the worst and most warlike regimes from Earth's own history." Halsey admitted. "It's only a matter of time before they become bold enough to try and besiege one of our worlds."

"These guys are apparently more arrogant than anyone outside of the Innies when they started their Second Insurrection." Denton added. "It doesn't help that they've basically been allowed free reign to do whatever they want for centuries. Like Catherine said, its not a question of if but when."

"Congratulations...you reached the same conclusion in minutes that it took our top researchers and data analysts months to achieve" Margaret replied, managing to make it sound like faint praise.

Denton snorted. "Then you need to get new ones. You said they were your top researchers? Hand them over to me and I'll make sure they deserve that title."

The truth of the matter was, those researchers and data analysts were merely brilliant. Savants like Denton and Halsey were rare, and everybody (including Denton) knew it. Which is why the head of ONI (someone who was used to instant obedience) tolerated Denton's disrespect and rudeness.

However, not even people like Halsey and Denton could be good at everything. Which Halsey demonstrated when she asked "So why the concern?...they're too weak to be any real threat to us."

"Because she's afraid that a war with the batarians will become a war with all the other Citadel species...who are well on their way to having more nukes than we have people...and regardless of what she makes the press say we still haven't recovered enough from the Great War to fight another conflict like that." Denton (who even though he would never admit it, was sometimes a great politician) accurately guessed.

"Not to mention their territory is the only thing that's within spitting distance of ours." Denton added. "From there it's just a matter of them turning on more of those blasted Relays we keep finding." Ever since the UNSC/UEG's discovery of the first Mass Relay in the Shanxi system, they seemingly started to appear everywhere, even in territories long since held by the UNSC. "So what do you suggest? It's not like we can go all 'American' and just topple the current regime and create a new one." He snarked, grabbing a bottle of water from a cluster of them at the center of the table before drinking its contents.

"Why not?" Admiral Parangosky asked, a truly wicked smile crossing the old woman's face for a moment.

"For starters; there's have to be something we can work with in the first place. It's one thing to play on existing grievances, its another to try and make them from scratch." Denton shot back.

"That all?" Gibson asked, drawing both the doctors' attention. "I've already had prowlers, infiltrators and geist troopers sent in. And they all tell me that this 'hegemony'," He waved his hand around to show his opinion on said government, "is just a powder keg waiting to blow. Almost three-quarters of their population are slaves, another sixteenth are lower-class citizens, and more than half of their standing forces are tasked with just trying to keep any slaves from revolting. If that's all you need, then they've done the job for us and then some." Tilting back his flask as he finished.

"My people are also ready to act as needed." Rich added. "We've already identified more than a number of their 'nobility' and other high value targets, and can move in as needed. My squads tell me that compared to their regular operations, their recent scouting missions have been a cakewalk."

"That still begs the question; what do you need us for?" Halsey asked, finishing off her now cooled coffee. "It seems as though you have figured everything out already."

"To be honest I wanted you to confirm my people's findings before launching an operation like this...but I will also need your expertise to deal with the fallout from what's likely to happen as a result." the ruthless old woman admitted.

"You want me to figure out how to keep the Council from declaring war on us when they figure out what were doing" Denton said with a groan. The memory of Councilor Wrex breaking his nose making the regrown organ itch.

"Yes...I also want you to help us determine how to create a new government once the Hegemony has fallen...with a friendly nation across the border and in Council space we can influence and perhaps even control the other Citadel species" the head of ONI told the scientists.

"Damn it you old woman...do you even know what the word 'hubris' means?" Denton sighed. Already imagining the many things that could go wrong with such an ambitious plan built on so many assumptions.

"If that was all, you would have only called for Denton. Not both of us." Halsey pointed out. "You want my Spartans for this, don't you?" It was a well known fact among the upper echelons that the Spartan-IIs only listened to John-117, who in turn listened only to Fleet Admiral Hood and his 'mother', Halsey. The Spartan-IIIs and Spartan-IVs were far more malleable in comparison.

"Yes, I do." Parangosky didn't even try to deny it. "Your Spartan's are the best the UNSC has to offer. The S-IIIs and S-IVs hardly compare to them. And I'd prefer to have every advantage I can get ahold of."

Halsey wasn't surprised. Her Spartans were the only reason anyone ever wanted to meet with her at this point. And ever since they had been made their own division, she had been in more meetings than she ever cared to be in. "I'll speak with John, but no promises. There are only so few of my 'children' left, and I would prefer not to bury any more of them."

Parangosky pretended to be sympathetic, but in truth she was unmoved. She felt Doctor Halsey had participated in and performed enough inhumane actions at this point that Halsey no longer had the right to act as though she still had a conscience. The Spartans had been her brainchild in the first place. ONI had simply gave her the resources to make it a reality. Parangosky had given up her conscience decades ago, regarding it as a weakness that she couldn't afford.

"So we are in agreement then?" The two scientists nodded. One not looking forward to the myriads of migraines that were surely headed his way in the future, the other thinking about one of her 'children'.

"Then we shall take our leave." The ONI officers frose from their seats and made to leave. Just as the doors opened, Parangosky paused for a moment. "And Catherine, I'll be expecting your answer soon." With that the three of them did leave, leaving the two scientists behind.

As the three made their way back to the ship, Rich asked, "You think she'll go for it?"

"She will." The Admiral confirmed. "The Beta program is the closest she'll ever get to having a lasting legacy. I assume preparations have already been made?"

"Already started pulling the funds from the usual sources, as is everything else. The only thing left is where. Don't exactly have a lot of holes left to hide something like that."

"For now it doesn't matter." The terrible old woman turned to Rear Admiral Rich and Captain Gibson as she said formally, "When we get back I want you two to begin the preparations...Operation Spartacus is a go."

15. Fragile Peace: Dawn of Change

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk II

cowritten with aDarkone

Chapter 15

Fragile Peace: Dawn of Change

"If you want to make enemies, try and change something."

-Woodrow Wilson

Khar'Shan, the homeworld of the Batarian race, capital world of the Batarian Hegemony, and center of almost all slave trade, indeed the only known technically "legal" slave trade in the known galaxy. If you asked most Batarians, it was the center of the universe or even the galaxy. If one asked if there were such a thing as a "superior race" most batarians would point to themselves. And if you asked about equality and abolition, you were likely to be knocked out and wake up with a slave collar around your neck before you had even know what happened.

The ancient cities of Khar'Shan, which most if not all were built on the back of slave labor, still stood proud and tall amongst the modern skyscrapers, monoliths and orbital elevators.

Across the lower districts of Pride Rock City, one of Khar'Shan's oldest cities, a young batarian woman fled from her pursuers. Leaping over debris, people and bodies, she ran as hard as she could, any human that saw her technique would call her a parkour runner, using her wits, body and environment to traverse as fast she could.

Her name was Jella Korragan, and once she had been a citizen of the Hegemony (albeit one from the lowest caste). Then when she was just a girl, her life had been flipped over and from then on, she had been a slave, prized for her looks and body, and traded between several owners over the course of her life. That is, until several months ago, when she had finally worked up the nerve to stand up against her 'master' and struck back with a kitchen knife. Stabbing him through the heart.

Once she had realized what she had done, she grabbed what clothes, credits and supplies she could before bolting from her late master's estate. For the next several months she ran from both slave-trackers and government forces, and whenever the opportunity arose, she tried her best to free her fellow slaves. Either by attacking their minders or outright killing the slave owners, once she had figured out how to disable the slave collars and prevent them from going off when the owner or minders died. Slave collars were primed to detonate under a myriad of circumstances; one of them being the death of the identified owner of the collars.

It had never worked out though as most of the slaves she freed were almost immediately recaptured or were so broken, they had simply seen no point in trying to attain freedom. And now, after months of avoiding the state police who were hunting, it almost seemed like those slaves had a point.

Back in the present, another figure was watching the runaway slave with keen interest, unseen and unnoticed. The figure had watched the former slave for the past few days; seeing how she had evaded the state "police", if they could be called that, with relative ease. He had been watching her for the past several days, learning her patterns, methods and other behavior. Assessing her worth and viability for the Operation. And so far, things looked promising for the batarian woman. No formal training or experience, and yet she had managed to elude the authorities for as long as she had. Impressive perhaps, but there were others.

But from what Jella's silent observer could tell, her luck was running out. A squad of heavily armed police officers appeared to be zeroing in on Korrigan's current location. Using the electronics and AI built into his armor, the watching human male was able to listen in on the squad's communications.

"Yeah it looks like our lead was solid...its definitely that crazy bitch Korrigan" the squad leader reported to headquarters.

Then he turned to his men and said "okay boys...Jella killed her master so there's no need to bring her in alive...but if you want to have some fun with her first that's fine...just don't take long...I've got an early shift tomorrow and I don't wanna miss out on all my rest because you idiots wasted all night making some uppity slave squeal."

His squadmates simply nodded obediently. Although two of them couldn't suppress their lusty grins. Wondering just what kind of noises they could get Jella to make before they were done with her.

As he saw the five batarian males corner Jella in the alley where she had been resting, the watching man knew the time had come for him to make a choice. Either let Jella die here and now, or recruit her for Operation Spartacus.

In truth, the agent of ONI wasn't sure that Jella Korrigan was right for what his superiors had in mind. When he had sent back his reports of the potential assets back to his superiors, he had expected for others to be chosen as prime candidates. So it was surprised when she was listed as one of the primes. He was half tempted to just let things lie and leave. However, as he saw the thuggish officers mob the surprised and horrified Jella something inside him snapped. He couldn't just stand by as these supposed agents of law and order gangraped a woman to death. These 'officers' deserved to die, a sentiment his AI companion readily agreed with.

Jella Korrigan's four eyes were wide with fear as she tried to hold onto her clothes (that the police were doing their best to rip off). Promising herself that she wouldn't give them the satisfaction of crying or begging or for mercy. Hoping that she could keep her promise as they ripped off her ragged shirt, leaving her naked above

the waist.

"Kids" the batarian police sergeant said with a shrug, as his men eagerly held Jella down and started to pull down their own pants. Having seen so many women raped that he took the whole process utterly for granted.

"Okay boys...speed it up...I've got a long day tomorrow and I don't wanna-" a wet squelching noise was heard, brain, blood and bone splattering across the ground as squad leader's words were silenced by a bullet to the head. The body dropping to the floor with a thud.

The rest of the squad, seeing their squad leader die, dropped Jella, hands going for their weapons, before four more wet squelches sounded. Their heads seeming to explode as the high powered silenced shots perforated their skulls. Dying before they could draw their weapons or even call for reinforcements.

Shocked and covered in her would-be rapists blood, Jella Korrigan got to her feet as a large figure dropped to the ground with barely a whisper. Getting a good look at her rescuer, who was wearing jet black armor, she saw the armor hid all of the person's featuring. They were holding a gun thicker than her arm in one large hand. The figure bent down, picking up a few small hollow canisters.

"Did you kill them?...who're you?" Jella gasped out. The armored figure turned, facing her for the first time. Jella looked directly at the figure, only to see her face reflecting back in the polarized visor.

The agent turned his head to glance at the bodies before returning to face Jella, "Yes...no man should treat a woman like that...as for who I amâ€¦" He paused, not sure just what to tell her. When ONI had told him of what his job would be, they had never covered what they would do when making contact. "You can call me John Doe" the agent replied, his armor's speaker filtering his voice to sound Batarian. He put out a hand to help pick her up.

Jella Korrigan simply accepted the, if rather odd, name. The person sounded like a batarian, but never had she heard of that kind of name. Which was strange, since the only other race that looked similar to batarians were asari, and only to female batarians. And this person was clearly male from what she could see. Taking the offered hand, she asked, "What you do want?"

"My superiors seek the same thing as many in the Hegemony desire: the takedown of the slavecratic regime, brick by corrupt brick." the agent answered.

As she started recovering from what had just happened, she noticed for the first time how tall the person before her was. He towered over her by at least a good head. "But why?" Jella said in honest confusion, as far as she knew outsiders had never cared about how the Hegemony treated its slaves. And this person was no batarian.

"The Hegemony is a threat to my people...and no government should treat its people the way that yours does." the armored warrior replied. The agent stepped forward, somewhat surprised when Jella didn't step back. "Now I offer you a choice: would you rather

continue to run until men like these," he gestured to the bodies around the two of them, "catch up with you again? Or would rather join me, and bring down those who sent these men after you in the first place?"

Jella Korragan had little to reason to trust the man. She didn't know his name, title, or even species. But he was the first person to help her in a very long time. And she hated the Hegemony with every fiber of her being.

"Yes...oh gods yes" Jella exclaimed as she reached out to the human Spartan. She stepped forward, only for exhaustion to finally claim her as she fell forward. Only to be caught by the armored warrior. The last words she heard before darkness claimed her were, "Welcome, Jella Korragan, to the Resistance."

Thus began the first phase of Operation Spartacus.

****APUFMKII****

On the surface, life aboard the Citadel hadn't changed much since before the arrival of the humans on the galactic stage. It was still the center of trade and commerce within 'civilized' space, and a large city-state in its own right. With countless apartment buildings, shops, parks, factories, theaters, and other places for civilians to work and play.

But just below the surface many changes were apparent. Security had tightened significantly, with C-Sec expanding in order to patrol all areas of the station more aggressively than ever before. The Powers That Be on the space station demanding that the police cut down on crime and corruption in order to protect the Citadel from any internal threats.

C-Sec was assisted in this task by the growing military presence aboard the Citadel. Especially in the form of troops from the Hierarchy. These soldiers helped the police protect government buildings and any other area on the station they considered of vital interest to national security.

In space the changes were even more obvious. The Citadel Defense Fleet was twice the size of the fleet the humans had swept aside three and a half years ago. The Citadel itself had been upgraded too, with numerous heavy weapons added to the outer structure. Many of them powerful enough to punch through a dreadnought with its barriers up. Despite official rules against it, there were even a large number of nuclear missiles aboard the Citadel now that could be fired at attacking ships, enough to nuke an entire world if they were used ruthlessly enough.

Nevertheless, the area where security had been upgraded the most was still probably the Citadel Tower, which was the center of government both for the Citadel and Council space as a whole. With numerous krogan warriors, asari commandos, STG operatives, and turian soldiers monitoring and guarding the tower at all times. Doing their best to ensure the safety of the Citadel Council. Determined to prevent a repeat of when the humans kidnapped the Council three and a half years ago.

However, the Councilors were uncomfortably aware of the fact that if

they went to war with the humans again, it probably wouldn't be enough. They needed a real edge, something that could adjust the galactic balance of power in their favor. Which is what they were meeting today to discuss.

"Three more of our shipyards became operational this week and all the vessels built there will be constructed with the more efficient engines our asari comrades have developed and be designed to fire multiple nuclear missiles at a time" the Salarian Councilor reported to his colleagues.

"Excellent news, Vald'n...have your scientists made any further progress unlocking the secrets of Slipspace?" Councilor Tevos asked.

"Results in that area have been more...problematic" Councilor Vald'n confessed.

At this point in time, the STG research teams were gaining an elementary understanding of Slipspace. They had sent automated probes into the dimensional realm known as Slipspace, but the probes tended to be destroyed almost immediately as they entered the portal, ranging from the probes exploding, imploding, collapsing in on itself or simply disappearing. And the scientists involved had no idea why.

It had been a massive stroke of luck that they learned how to access slipspace in the first place: sensor data from when the UNSC ships had entered and exited slipspace at both the Citadel and the Turian home system had given them a plethora of data on how they generated the portals to the higher plane of existence, along with, albeit wrecked, slipspace drives, least what they assumed to be slipspace drives, before the humans could claim all the debris.

However, the problems were twofold now: the readings from the probes before they were lost were passed off as incorrect as they either followed no known physics models or violated them outright. Which was of course impossible. And they were having difficulties trying to actually navigate once the portals were open. Having to start from scratch, but without a reference point it was akin to trying to shoot a target in the dark while blindfolded and deaf.

"We still are unable to understand just what slipspace really is; what data we obtain in both anomalous and inconclusive, as impossible as it may be. However, we have learned just how to detect an imminent slipspace "rend" as it were, thanks to the unique energy the portals generate. At the very least, we will be able to know when they are about to arrive."

"Good...I'm tired of those hairy mammals always getting the drop on us" Councilor Wrex replied.

"Yeah, great. Now we know when they're about come tear us a new one, joy and hurrah." Matriarch Aethyta bit out, sarcasm lacing every word. "Not like its going to do us much good if they can just run over us like its nothing." Tevos held in a sigh, the brash, and many would call her, radical matriarch was not one to mince words. Unfortunately in this more dangerous and unpredictable era, Tevos (a diplomat by training and inclination) needed a military advisor. Especially one like Aethyta, who held views that had long been

dismissed as too radical or aggressive, that circumstances were forcing the asari elite to reconsider.

"No no, perhaps it may be possible to make some sort of device to keep Slipspace portals from forming in our territory. Slipspace seems to be inherently unstable, so making it reliable enough to travel through is hard but making it more unstable to prevent passage, should be relatively easy" Doctor Mordin Solus, the salarian Councilor's own military advisor said at his usual breakneck speed. A male whose acknowledged scientific and tactical brilliance had won him enough recognition to earn such a position (and who according to rumor, had been offered the top job at the STG and turned it down). "Least in theory. Based only on conjecture currently. Still too much about slipspace we don't know. Need lateral thinking to understand. Something the humans are more than capable of, it seems."

"Lateral thinking? Slipspace jammers? That's all well and good, but I have another question: does anyone, I mean Anyone, even know where their worlds are located? Or how to even reach them?" The turian councilor, Cicero Valon, interjected. He had been ushered into the position over three years ago, almost immediately after the human invasion of the turian home system, and their subsequent departure. Once the fires had died down, the turian people had called out for the person that had brought such ruin upon them; with the blame being shouldered by Cicero's predecessor, Teranus. His removal had been so abrupt that when Cicero had accepted the position, Teranus was nowhere to be found to assist in the transition of power. Leading to the new Councilor and the Primarch working around the clock for several months to bring things to a manageable level.

"Yes we do actually...turian intelligence finally managed to decrypt the data we got off the 'Everest'," saying the unfamiliar name with some difficulty, "before it blasted its way out of our lunar base" Saren Arterius, former decorated Spectre and current advisor to the turian Councilor said. The turian advisor had left the Spectres shortly after the events three years for several reasons. Such as wanting to dedicate all his time and energy to assisting the Hierarchy. As a Spectre, he may have had free pass for almost anything in Council space, but it also meant he was at the beck and call at the Council, rather than the Hierarchy. Along with the fact that he felt that he would better serve on the back lines, than the front lines. That, and the fact that with his new position, he could keep a closer eye on his family, especially his brother Desolas. His greed and desire to be remembered in history was what started this entire mess in the first place. By the grace of the Spirits, Desolas somehow survived everything three years ago, and now was under house arrest at the Arterius home.

"We can tell you exactly where the human worlds are...and potentially which ones are their biggest colonies. The data our technicians managed to obtain off the Everest was incomplete but it contained at least that much...unfortunately from our analysis, the data was in the process of being erased when something or someone stopped it. As a result, we only have the most basic of data. Any details regarding the worlds themselves, whether they be colonies, fortress worlds, or farm worlds are missing." Saren paused for a moment, making sure he had the attention of the councilors. "The problem however, is that we lack the means of getting there. To the best of our knowledge, there are few Mass Relays that leads to human territory, and we don't know how many more, if any, Relays exist that lead to the human systems.

Or if they lead to their core systems. I've already sent the data to astronavigation schools along with any astronomy groups to try and find any more relays, or the location of potential relays, that may lead to a human system"

"And...there is something else." Again he paused, this time his right hand reaching towards his prosthetic left arm. The injury, an understatement if there ever was one, happened three years; when the Council had been kidnapped by the human special forces teams. He had been one of the few Spectres close enough to actually and try and aid the C-Sec forces. He had managed to ambush the kidnappers, using one of the Keeper tunnels. Opening fire the moment he had dropped out of the tunnel, hitting the ambassador and two of the soldiers, only to see his rounds bounce off the shields of the latter two. Before he could do anything else, one of the behemoths turned with impossible speed, drew its pistols and fired at him. Saren couldn't recall how many shots were fired, nor how he avoided most them. But he remembered the pain; the shots impact his shoulder and upper right torso, the rounds exploding after impact. He had only survived being left for dead, and from a later camera feed, the human ambassador taking priority. "We should not be so eager for a fight. I very much doubt the humans have been sitting idly by for the past three years."

"Realistically speaking, even if we could reach the worlds, that would only mean that we could severely hurt them before going down in any sort of full scale war. We still have no means of protecting our worlds from whatever destroyed Impera...so we need to delay or outright avoid open conflict with them for as long as possible" Saren admitted.

"Yes...but once we can reach their worlds we can nuke them until they glow...it may be harder for us to physically destroy a planet..but if we kill all life on the surface it amounts to the same thing" Doctor Okeer, Councilor Wrex's official advisor, and one of the few krogan so ruthless that that even the Councilor was taken aback by it sometimes, argued. Okeer was one of the few krogan that was older than Wrex (by several centuries in fact). And thankfully for the krogan people, was more content to think and tinker in his labs than try and actually lead the people. There were rumors that he had been trying to create a more "pure" krogan, before taking his position as advisor. "You pacifists don't know how to fight a real war."

"So what?...if we destroy their worlds, and they destroy ours, we are all dead regardless." Saren pointed out.

Valdn, Tevos, and Wrex all shared a look as their advisors argued without any input from the Councilors. Unlike Cicero, they remembered what it was like to be a Citadel Councilor before the arrival of the humans. Before Councilors needed official military advisors or daily security briefings. And all of them missed those days sometimes.

As the meeting resumed, Saren couldn't help but marvel at what the humans had done to the galactic community in less than four years. Turning the once conservative and even somewhat lethargic Citadel Council into virtual warmongers. Desperate to retaliate against a more powerful foe.

"Do we have any good news to report?" Tevos asked wearily.

Silence permeated the meeting room. Then her own military advisor spoke up, saying "The newest economic report is in...apparently the Republics are doing better than at any point in their history since the war with the humans."

"That's good news...then the asari should be able to finally build up a decent fleet and take over some of the peacekeeping duties that the rest of us do...As you've been promising since Impera was made into an asteroid belt." the turian Councilor said with sarcasm.

Tevos repressed the urge to glare at Aethyta. She knew that the matriarch was trying to embarrass her into fulfilling the promises she had made on behalf of the Asari Republics. The radical matriarch had been trying to push for increased militarization and military spending since before the humans. The problem was that the asari's own leaders were afraid of how the voters would react when their maidens were sent off to fight the fearsome humans. Only to receive a smug look in return from the radical.

"Yes we are currently working on commissioning both new ships and shipyards, but it will take time before we actually have a sizeable fleet as most of the asari are still of the mind of just waiting out the humans." When she said most, she was referring to those who didn't know of the Prothean Beacon within the Temple of Athame. Unaware of the fact that the humans (or at least Doctor Denton) may have discovered the asari's ultimate trump card. Forcing them to take radical action in order to maintain their dominant role in galactic affairs.

"Now Vald'n, I believe you mentioned something to me about the New Covenant, the last time we spoke" Tevos said in an attempt to change the subject.

The salarian councilor leaned back in his chair. "At the moment it is only rumors and hearsay, but it seems the New Covenant, or at the very least, their ships, are starting to fall into a state of disrepair. According to the rumors, the New Covenant ships, as formidable as they are, are old. And they lack the skill and knowledge to repair them. How this is possible is beyond me."

"Is that all?" Wrex grunted. "I didn't think you salarians would actually put much, if any, stock in rumors. Thought the STG was all facts and science."

"That is usually the case but most of the New Covenant is beyond the reach of the Mass Relays which means that we have to get most of our information about them second or even third hand" the salarian Councilor pointed out.

Vald'n didn't retort as such. "And under regular circumstances you would be right, however there have been signs that the rumors may be more than just that. A recent census has shown that there has been a significant increase in immigration from the New Covenant, along with many New Covenant citizens showing a rather keen interest in our engineering education programs. If that wasn't enough, comparing how their ships looked from two years ago, there are clear signs of degradation and shoddy attempts at maintenance."

"And if the New Covenant collapses, all their stuff will be up for

grabs." Wrex thought aloud.

"Exactly. Once their coalition begins falls apart under the weight of its own ignorance, its only a simple matter of picking up the pieces. The potential bounty we could gain is staggering, none more so than the chance of getting ahold of slipspace technology. Blueprints, schematics, or even a working Slipspace drive for us to reverse engineer...and once that happens our enemies will lose their greatest advantage against us" Vald'n explained. As all of those present were considering the implications of reverse engineering their enemy's greatest advantage, little did they realize just how far they were already behind.

****APUFMKII****

In another sector of the galaxy, above the UNSC fortress world of Reach, preparations were being made for the demonstration of two potential new additions to the UNSC arsenal.

Much of the UNSC brass was in attendance: Fleet Admirals Lord Hood, Harper, Vice Admirals Jacob Keyes, Hieronymus Michael Stanforth and Jesse De La Rosa, Generals from the UNSC Army Felipe Kits, Darius Black, Lt General from the UNSC Marine corp, Franklin Mendez and Colonel from the UNSC Army, Ackerson, to name a few. Those who were part of the upper echelons of ONI were conspicuously missing.

Alongside them were the ones in charge of the two projects: Derek Hardison and his Chief Engineer, Linda Danvers, the ones in charge of Project Eezo. With them was their counterpart and the man in charge of the Battleship design project, named Project Babylon; Christian Choi. Neither of the two pairs had really met or worked with the other, but both knew of the other's reputation.

Derek had been trying to make a name for himself as an expert on alien technology before the UNSC/Council war. In the wake of that conflict. when the human military had begun expanding again, he was able to use that reputation to secure an administrator's position at the one of the UNSC's newest shipyards. But he had not had a chance to really prove himself yet. This demonstration was Hardison's opportunity to show the faith those that had recruited him for project Eezo had had was justified.

Choi, on the other hand, was not a newcomer like Derek. He too was a relatively fresh face to the UNSC, and much like Derek, had been born during the Great War. A near prodigy, he had caught the attention of several companies and been hired as part of Misirah Armories' Research and Development Branch, once he had attained his Masters Degree. But what gained him his reputation, and the attention of the UNSC, was his creation of the MACH system, a technology now present in virtually all UNSC ballistic weaponry.

Today both Projects would demonstrate their capabilities to the higher echelons, to try and gain more funding to continue research and expand upon it. Least, that was the official statement. It would also determine, to an extent, just what direction the UNSC would focus on to counter the advantages of the Citadel races.

Outside the station where everyone was gathered, they could see the ships, both Derek's and Choi's moving into position, and in the case

of the latter; derelict ships to serve as targets.

"Well Mr. Hardison, are you sure that this will work?" Lord Hood asked. "I'm not a astrophysicist or engineer, but from what this 'codex' claims, it may not be possible. This is new technology after all, we don't have the firmest of grips."

"The same could be said for when humanity first started using Forerunner technologies Admiral." Derek replied, "I assure you, this test will go off without issue."

"Although I'm more familiar with my own design of course, I am optimistic that Hardison's Mass Effect warships will workâ€|they'll provide a fine compliment to my own heavier vessels" Choi in an effort to seem fair and impartial. Though in truth, he was just as invested in his project professionally and emotionally as Hardison, he was simply better at not being obnoxious about it.

"Yes..I've seen your designs." Vice Admiral Stanforth looked towards the asian project leader. "Tell me, are you sure you're ships are actually combat-effective? I've ran the numbers for your 'Jericho' cannons. Only seven kilometers a second? I have my doubts."

"I assure you Admiral, my ships will be more than combat effective. And I have since corrected that oversight. The muzzle velocity can be increased to forty-four kilometers a second as needed. And yes, they will handle that firepower." He respectfully replied. "Though, it will be interesting to see our ships using this new technology. If this works, then the UNSC will gain a massive tactical advantage."

Some of the brass looked towards both the new ships, as they moved to their final positions, with new appreciation. The tablet in Derek, Linda's and Choi's hand lit up. "Sirs, the AIs report everything is ready for the test." Derek said, since he was the first one to be demonstrating. Each of the ships were being controlled by a number of AIs, to eliminate any risk of the loss of human life in the event of some sort of accident.

The UNSC, and to a greater extent ONI, could be ruthless, but the didn't risk valuable personnel without reason, for the most part. This was still largely untested alien technology, as far as the human military was concerned.

At least until now.

Derek Hardison of course, insisted on giving the signal to begin himself. Communicating with the AI onboard each of his vessels as he started the countdown.

"Initialize start up of Mass Effect Drive Cores. Reconfirm stellar coordinates. All ships prepare for jump on my mark."

In unison all twelve ships in the fleet activated their Mass Effect engines. The massive, by Council Race standards, warships glowing blue as they prepared to take an FTL jump from one side of the solar system to another. Inside, their mass effect drive cores spinning up and reading for the transition, sending electrical currents through the Eezo within. Derek Hardison grinning at his shining moment of glory.

On the station, the holomap tracked their positions, marking them on the solar map as green triangles. Numerous people and machines preparing to track the warships as they moved. Everyone involved wanting to collect as much data as possible.

Denton started counting down.

"Entering FTL, four, three, two, one. Mark."

The ships started to glow slightly, a blue hue beginning to envelope them, then disaster struck. As the dark energy enveloped the warships, in half a dozen of them, certain sections had their mass reduced more than the rest of the vessels. The difference in mass resulting in the ships violently ripping apart as sections of the ships reached FTL speeds while the rest of the vessels remained too heavy to do so. Literally flying apart as Derek Hardison looked on in abject horror. Five others seemed to implode as the dark energy dramatically increased their mass. While a single ship was wrapped in dark energy and slung itself forward at incredible speeds.

On the holomap, almost all of the green triangles began to wink out of existence, with only one reappearing. The one ship that had actually managed to enter FTL whole. Derek whispered under his breath. "No...no, no, no, this can't be happening...this can'tâ€¦"

To his right, Linda was also shocked by what was happening, and was considering just what she could do to distance herself as much as possible from Derek professionally. Choi remained impassive, though internally he was disappointed, but at the same, thankful for the failure. While it would have been nice to possess ships with such maneuverability and able to gain a quick tactical advantage, he had some reservations about it. On the other hand, since Derek's Project Eezo had failed so spectacularly, the odds were good that his Babylon-class battleships would become a mainstay of the UNSC navy.

"Well...that was...educational." Choi said, trying to break the tension, only to get a nasty look from Derek. Most of the officers however were shaking their heads, mostly at the wasted resources, showing their disappointment in some form or another. Lord Hood was pinching his eyes. "Let's hope that your Babylon-class vessels prove to be more fruitful, Mr. Choi."

Choi nodded, bringing up his own tablet. "All ships, calculate fire solutions to each of your assigned targets. Group A use configuration 1, Groups B and C, use configurations 2 and 3 respectively. Lock onto targets and wait for my command." On the holotank, blue squares, twelve of them, split off into three groups of four, heading towards a series of white squares on the map. In real space, twelve Babylon-class warships headed towards their targets: a number of derelict ships, both military and civilian. Along with a few intact, and stripped, Citadel vessels; spoils of war from four years ago.

Soon enough, all twelve ships were aimed and readied. Choi looked at his tablet to confirm everything was ready. "Fire on my mark. Mark." The space was briefly lit up in bright flashes as eight 16-inch Jericho cannons on each ship's starboard side cut loose on their

targets, utterly obliterating them. While the officers were nodding in appreciation of the demonstration, Stanforth even slowly clapping, Choi looked at the data from the ships and frowned. All the ships had fired all of their cannons with a muzzle velocity of forty-four kilometers a second, the difference being how they were fired. Group A had fired in the staggered method used in world war II by the US Navy. Group B had fired outer-inner method, with the outer turrets firing first on each turret, then the two inner ones. Group C had fired all eight at once. The results were not pleasing.

Group A was fine, no real issues. Group B's shots had all landed on target too. But most of the shots that the vessels in Group C had fired had nearly missed. It was only thanks to the relatively fragile nature of their targets that the Council vessels they fired on had been destroyed when the shots had skimmed their targets.

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"Something is wrong with the targeting system we designed...its not working at 100% efficiency or even close to it" Choi realized. As he took a closer look, he noticed another problem, the housing between the turret and the ship itself had been pushed almost to its breaking point with the third group. Constant barrage of all guns firing in unison would tear the ship apart from the inside out. Thankfully, both those little details were known only to him.

But the watching brass simply saw his ships obliterate their targets. Lacking the scientific knowledge or real time data to spot the problem. Or so Choi hoped anyway.

"Mister Cho, that was very impressive, but will your vessels be able to perform that well in real combat?" Lord Hood asked he as he approached the scientist.

"I...believe so admiral. Of course I will want run further tests and if possible upgrades before we go into mass production" Choi said cautiously.

"Would you say that they're ready to be tested in the field?" the Fleet admiral asked. Something about his manner suggesting that he knew the test hadn't been as successful as it appeared on the surface.

"Perhaps," Choi replied, not confident enough to say yes, but not wanting to say no. "Too many variables to account for."

"Even though most of the shots Group C fired nearly missed?" Hood asked coldly. "And said nearly ripped themselves apart?"

"How did he know?" Choi's eyes widened.

As though reading his mind, Lord Hood replied with quiet intensity "You're not the only one with access to AIs at the moment...now get the problem fixed!...and if you ever try bullshitting me again I will have you repairing toilets for the rest of your career." It was not an idle threat. The man was more than dangerous than either the Head of ONI or Doctor Halsey.

As Admiral Hood stormed off, Linda Danvers walked over to Christian Choi. Smiling flirtatiously as she tried to physically and professionally distance herself from the disgraced Derek Hardison.

Telling Choi, "it sounds like the admirals are going to pull the funding from Project Eezo and give it to yours...so rather than beating around the bush let me just ask you if you have any positions available?"

Despite how she presented herself, Choi didn't react. He knew how to tell when someone was acting and someone was being sincere. Still, he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Of course, we will have need to expand. And from what I know of your work, Miss Danvers, we could use a woman like you." Choi replied as he extended his hand.

Derek Hardison was visibly fuming as he watched his lover and chief engineer leave him. Feeling as though his life was ruined. Knowing that his career might never recover from this disaster.

But Christian Choi was thinking, 'I know you think that you're trying to be clever Danvers...but if you can't help me fix the targeting system, you've just fled from one sinking ship to another. And I don't plan on going alone.'

****APUFMKII****

As the New Covenant's situation became increasingly desperate, it was forced to exploit resources that their people had once dismissed as not worthy of their time. Such as wreckage left on battlefields from the Covenant Civil War.

The Zortha System had once contained a thriving colony, productive titanium mines, and even a small shipyard. But fierce fighting between Loyalists and Separatists had resulted in the colony getting Glassed and the destruction of the shipyard decades ago. As a result, both the Separatists and Loyalists considered the battle a loss and had written off the entire system.

But with their fleets beginning to fall apart the New Covenant had started to desperately search past battlefields for anything that they could salvage. Trying to stall their seemingly inevitable collapse. Hoping to find something that could change their situation for the better. Sending searching parties to numerous star systems to find anything worth harvesting.

However, as a New Covenant scout ship exited Slipspace to arrive in the Zortha System, the crew encountered something unexpected.

Thousands of ships of all shapes and sizes were already in the system. With a Mass Relay, that his own people had once mistakenly identified as a Forerunner artifact and left alone when they could find no way to activate or access it, bringing dozens more to the Zortha system every few hours.

The scout ship's sensors indicated that the alien vessels were constructed by the Citadel races. While what the crew could see with their own eyes showed that these aliens were collecting and processing the very wreckage that their own people had hoped to salvage.

Despite their kind's warlike reputation, the Elite crew were not fools. They knew their little ship was no match for a fleet, no

matter how ramshackle it may be. Besides, their mission had been to gather data and scout for resources in the Zortha System, nothing more.

So the scout ship activated its Slipspace Drive and left the solar system. The captain trying to figure out the best way to inform his superiors that a massive fleet had invaded their territory.

****APUFMKII****

Of all the bad decisions Charz Taran had made during his life, deciding to raid one of the new human colonies the EUG had set up near Council space was perhaps the worst.

Humans were so hated throughout Citadel territory that Charz had figured plenty of people would pay good money to have to their personal human slave to push around. Moreover, he had assumed that a small colony on the fringes of human territory would be lightly defended. Showing just how much, or rather little, he knew about the defensive policy of the UNSC.

When he and his compatriots had first heard of the Mass Relay on the fringes of the Terminus that lead to a human world, a fringe human world, they had assumed it would be an easy job. To the best of their knowledge, fringe colonies were almost always lightly defended, and easier to raid. So he and his compatriots, recruited as many other ships, mercenaries and slavers as they could, for the first raid on a human world and claim as many as they could.

When he and the rest of the slavers exited the Mass Relay and moved towards the human colony, they had expected it to be a quick and easy job. Minimum losses, maximum profit. Charz shook his head at the memory. How wrong had they been.

Upon first arrival in the system, they scanned the colony, the stations in orbit and the ships nearby and found nothing. Absolutely nothing. No planetary guns, no warships and no orbital weaponry. Thinking they had absolute free reign, they had blindly charged in, paying little attention to the whatever debris their ships passed by (a fatal mistake if there ever was one).

Just as Charz's ship was about to enter high-orbit of the colony world, dozens of miniature suns lit up the void. Great big balls of nuclear fire enveloped the slaver ships, vaporizing everything in its path. Only Charz's ship and a few others had survived, by the grace of their gods being on the verge of the apparent minefield. "Or is that the anger of our lords?" Charz muttered, laughing humorlessly.

While the UNSC may have yet to have established its MAC grid, even in the absence of ships, the colony was not undefended. The humans had learned their lesson four years ago. Over dependence on the Orbital defense platform S-MACs meant that once those defenses were gone, outside of any planetary defenses, which were often far and few, there was nothing left to stop any invaders. The ODPs were both a first and last defense for many colony worlds. A lesson hard learned at Shanxi.

Since then, more lines of defense were added to supplement the ODPs.

Now, the first line of defense of any colony world, any UNSC world was a minefield of HORNET nuclear mines. The HORNET mine was an old UNSC weapon, harkening to the times of the Great War. Cold as interstellar space when deployed, controlled by either a central command center, or internal basic AIs communicating with each other, HORNET mines were devastating under any circumstances. With the only vessels able to endure them being an INF or CAS-class or larger.

The slaver ships (old and obsolete even by the standards of the Hegemony) never stood a chance. Before they could even thinking of trying to recover, boarding craft had departed from the stations in orbit, boarded the slaver ships and quickly seized control. Although it was hardly necessary, after seeing how badly outclassed they were, most of the surviving slavers, including Charz Taran himself, started broadcasting on all frequencies their unconditional surrender as they were being boarded.

Soon after that, ONI had stepped in and claimed custody of the prisoners. Charz still recalled his first 'meeting' with the humans. A memory he, and many of his fellow slavers, would sooner forget.

He couldn't remember what had happened between when he had surrendered and when he had woken up in the strange room. His hands cuffed together and linked to the table, his feet cuffed to the legs of the chair. And the solitary figure hidden in the dark on the opposite side of the table. It wasn't even much of a meeting. A meeting implies mutual discussion. Not, what he, and he assumed his fellow slavers got, was an ultimatum: Do as he was ordered, and he would profit greatly. Refuse, well he'd prefer not to remember just what he had been told would happen.

So now here he was, with perhaps another half dozen slaver vessels, on the way to Khar'Shan, their ships packed to the brim with their human 'cargo'. Insurrectionists, death row and life sentence convicts with no hope of parole or appeal, and any others who would otherwise be written up for dead or lost in human space, along with several ONI agents scattered in the midst. They would be sold off in Khar'Shan, with Charz netting some of the profit, the majority going to the ONI. Briefly, he considered revealing the human plot and netting all the profit himself when he scowled from the twang of pain from the base of his skull. ONI had installed a 'security measure' in him and others like him: a neural implant that could detect the most basic of thoughts, and depending on just how traitorous the thoughts were; would case a minor neural surge of pain, or overload the nervous system, resulting in death. The technology was not present anywhere in human space as it would be easily spotted. But ONI was betting that the batarians, or anyone else in Citadel space would realize this.

Shaking off the traitorous thoughts lest he get another shock, he focused on the planet filling up his viewscreen, wondering just why the humans were doing this. Little did he realize just what would become of his actions, and how they would change life in the Hegemony as anyone knew it.

****APUFMKII****

Before their reformation, after a fashion, the New Covenant was far more open minded than they had been before, and calmer. But considering how violent and xenophobic the old alien empire had been

that wasn't necessarily saying much. And even at its best the New Covenant wouldn't take invasions of its territory lying down.

On the periphery of the Zortha system, slipspace portals ripped apart real space as they appeared, drawing the attention of every single ship already present. As the Migrant Fleet began getting into formation in response, the first of the ships began to come through. Four CCS-class battlecruisers, each escorted by a trio of CRS-class light cruisers. Already the small force possessed enough firepower to take on the majority of the Quarian Migrant Fleet. Then, it came through. A CAS-Class Assault Carrier. Five point three kilometers of Covenant firepower and grace. Leading the task force was Rtas'Vadum, Special Operations Commander of the New Covenant, and personally tasked by the Council to investigate the disturbance and intrusion. As ship cleared the portal, he could clearly see from the bridge the sheer volume of ships that had intruded on their territory.

"Oh Ancestors" Admiral Han'Gerrel vas Neema gasped in horror. The alien warships dwarfed any of the vessels under his command. Moreover, according to what little intelligence he had; on how the New Covenant had performed during the UNSC/Council war, those seventeen warships probably had enough firepower to take on and destroy the entire Migrant Fleet.

But Han'Gerrel hadn't become the leader of the Heavy Fleet by being timid. So he quickly mastered himself and ordered his ships to get into defensive formation between the newcomers and the civilian vessels. Hoping that the other admirals could come up with a nonviolent solution to this, if the glowing spheres were any indication, apparently frighteningly well armed, problem. And he did not relish the chance to take on that many dreadnoughts, let alone the super-dreadnought.

At the same time Admiral Shala'Raam was mobilizing the ships of the Patrol Fleet into defensive positions. She was uncomfortably aware of the fact that by most anyone's standards, her ships were lightly armed and armored. But like him it was her duty to protect the Quarian people and so she would do so to the best of her ability.

Daro'Xen was on the verge of panic, out of everyone in the Migrant Fleet, only she and a few others knew just what they were facing if this went to the Varren pits. Kinetic barriers only stopped solid matter, not liquids or gasses. And it did absolutely nothing to protect against high-energy plasma. Coupled with the fact that, because of the reliance on kinetic barriers and the drawbacks of drive core, most of the Flotilla ships had very thin hulls. A single shot to even one of their heavier ships would probably gut it through and through, and still be able to pierce another ship. Based on the data she and her teams gathered from the wrecks in the system, even one of their smaller ships, the ones the size of a cruiser, could, no, it did, have the firepower to utterly destroy them. And considering the flagship of the force before them...Daro simply retreated into her office, awaiting whatever fate may come.

Zaal'Koris, unlike most of his fellow Admirals, was being pushed to his limit as he worked to keep the entire civilian fleet from panicking and either fleeing the system back through the Relay, or in a few rare cases, opening fire on the aliens.

Perhaps because he had the fewest responsibilities to overwhelm him at the moment, Rael'Zorah saw the situation more clearly than any of the other admirals.

'The aliens haven't opened fire...they seem to be waiting for something,' Rael'Zorah thought.'so just what, if they are, waiting for?' He soon got his answer as one of the bridge crew, the communications officer reported a general broadcast on all frequencies. When he ordered the crewman to accept the call, he was not surprised it was a video call. What made Rael nearly stumble backwards was the face that greeted him.

The face was vaguely reptilian, with small deep set eyes and no nose to speak of. But what really drew his attention was the large maw filled with fangs, covered with four mandibles that looked far more vicious than a turian's. All these features gave the creature a very predatory visage, and for once Rael was glad that he always wore a helmet, so that nobody could see the fear in his eyes.

On the other side of the screen, Rtas regarded the rather frail looking creature with interest, and a small amount of disdain. These 'quarians' if he recalled correctly from the Codex he had been given before being dispatched, were rather frail creatures. Those suits of theirs apparently required for their very survival. Still, he had to admit, he was impressed by how the creature showed no visible signs of fear, though that visor of its did help. "My name is Rtas'Vadum, Special Operations Commander of the New Covenant, and shipmaster of Glorious Redemption. I ask who are you, and the reason for your presence in New Covenant space."

To his credit, Rael did not stutter when he spoke, thanks to his, and the majority of the quarian people's, experience in constantly dealing with those with more power and resources than they did. Especially over the past few years. "Greetings, Commander Rtas'Vadum. I am Admiral Rael'Zorah vas Alarei of the Quarian people, and I will be speaking for them for the interim. I hope that this can remain peaceful."

Rtas held back a snort at the quarian's attempt to redirect the conversation. It was the obvious and blatant attempts, but still a decent one. "That remains to be seen. I ask again, what is the your purpose here? You're 'fleet' is trespassing on New Covenant territory and is apparently desecrating the dead. Are your people such scavengers that you would violate the dead?"

"I apologize commander...we didn't know this system belonged to anyone it appeared as though it had been abandoned for years" Rael'Zorah confessed, hoping their mistake wouldn't hurt his people too much.

"That still does not answer my question." Rtas gestured off-screen, signalling to the bridge crew to start preparing their lateral plasma lines and energy projectors. More of the outside turrets beginning to glow in response. "We may not have maintained a presence here, but it still is our territory. Now I ask for the last time, why are you here?"

Rael's mind raced at a mile a second, trying desperately to find a way of explaining why they were here without insulting the New

Covenant commander before him. As he tried and tried, he realized that honesty may be the best route here. "You ask why we are here? Why we are scavenging your world and the wrecks? The answer is simple: desperation. I do not know how much of our history you know Commander, but the fleet, this very fleet, is all the quarian people have, it is our only home. And it is falling apart. You wanted to know why we desecrate the dead? Its so that our own fleet does not become our graves. Our ships are falling apart, our people growing desperate. And the situation in Citadel space was becoming untenable. We were forced to decide to either stay and face what was almost certain death, or take a risk and come here."

As Rtas processed the answer, he gestured towards one of the bridge crew to bring up a detailed scan of several of the quarian ships. And was both in shock, and awe, by what he saw. The ships were decades, and in some cases centuries, old, and only held together by constant patches and the strictest of maintenance. Ships that were, by comparison, in worse or similar shape as many of the New Covenant's ships, many of which, most would see as irrecoverable, were apparently operational. Take into account the sheer number of ships and the fact they were running on the bare minimum of resources...to the veteran commander, it was unprecedented. Only the Hurgarok were capable of greater feats, and they were the supposedly the creation of the Forerunners themselves! 'High Charity must be informed of this. This is beyond my duty.' He thought before focusing back on Rael.

"Your plight and reasons are understandable. However, I must ask two things: the first that you cease your actions. I understand your plight, however I can not allow you to continue. But I will allow you to settle on the planet. The second being that you must remain here. I must inform my superiors, and I am almost certain they will come here. If there is to be any sort of agreement between our two people, I am not the one to negotiate them."

Rael was aghast. Whilst he had manage to keep his people from being vaporized, he now had to inform them that they must stop their activities, lest his actions be for naught. In addition was the fact that the more of these Covenant and their ships be soon be coming. In a surprisingly calm voice he responded, "Understood Commander, I will inform my people immediately. And hope that our people can come to some agreement." He saw Rtas give a curt nod before slumping into his seat. Wondering what the future would hold.

16. Fragile Peace: Changing Perspectives

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future MkII

co-written with aDarkone

WARNING: Scenes of graphic violence. Marking beginning and end of scenes with === line breaker. ****

Time passed since the events at Palaven

Chapter 14:

UNSC:3 years

New Covenant: 3 years

Citadel Council: 3 years+3 months

Quarian Migrant Fleet: 3 years+10 months

Chapter 15:

UNSC: 4 years +2 months

Citadel Council: 4 years+1 month

New Covenant: 4 years

Quarian Migrant fleet: 4 years

Chapter 16

Fragile Peace: Changing Perspectives

****4 years+3 months for all factions****

"_They told me to fight, and that's what I've done. Let historians sort through the wreckage, bodies, and broken lives to figure out the rest._"

â€"Admiral Preston J. Cole, Private Diaries recovered from his home after the Great War.

The Colony of Roost, in the Lambda Aurigae System. A rather peaceful colony in the Outer Rim of the UNSC territory, back during the insurrection. And one that had somehow escaped the notice of the Covenant since the Great War and then on. Since reclaimed by the UNSC/UEG, it was one of the few colonies that people could escape to and feel as though the past several decades had never happened at all.

People flocked to the planet in droves in recent months, as the UNSC/UEG economy continually rose more than it fell, a prime vacation spot for all.

And this was also the world Preston J. Cole chose for his current home. Four years ago, after the Everest had violently forced its way from its prison, and nearly instigated another war, Cole and the rest of others aboard the ship were awakened from cryosleep. The only ones already awakened, by the shipboard AI, being the onboard marine contingent.

It took another year after that to bring the awakened crew up to speed on current events, along with gaining testimony and gather records. It had been quite a shock to them to hear that the war had been over for decades, of how it evolved into what is now called the Heretic Wars, and the Second Insurrection. The sheer influx of information of what had happened over the past several decades was shocking to everyone, and a few rare cases, people actually passed out in disbelief as though it were a cartoon. Humanity, despite having suffered so many losses and so many setbacks, was now a galactic superpower; one with the ability to take on the Old Covenant Empire and possibly win, rather than the fighting retreat the Great War had been. Along with the Spartan programs.

First were the Spartan-IIs, the Warrior-Gods of humanity, neigh undefeatable and never surrendering. Cole recalled hearing whispers about them before his retirement and after. Next were the Spartan-IIIs, highly trained elites, and nothing more than teens, sent out in droves to die and buy humanity time. Of those two, both had few surviving members and both programs had since long been shut down. And last were the Spartan-IVs; successor to both the IIs and IIIs. The reduced cost of the S-IIIs by using consenting adults rather than the methods of the S-IIs and S-IIIs, but some semblance of the ability of the S-IIs by giving them a relatively cheaper version of the MJOLNIR armor, codenamed MJOLNIR GEN-II or just GEN-II.

Then of course, came the real shocker: the New Covenant, to an extent, worshipped humanity. All because of a tremendous stroke of luck that marked humanity as the children of their gods. Apparently that revelation had stopped the entire war almost on a dime. And the Heretic Wars was apparently a Covenant civil war between those who wanted to end the war, and those who wanted to end the humans. If that wasn't enough, the Covenant had actually saved those from the latter faction, with humanity returning the favor later on. Now the reformed New Covenant were, to an extent, allied with the UNSC/UEG.

Then of course, came the more recent of events: the second instance of First Encounter with the Citadel Council and the associate races. Along with the circumstances that resulted in their escape and near war.

After that however, came the interrogation. For Cole, it was both like and unlike the time when he had been brought in after the reported 'destruction' of the UNSC Bellerophon aka the Bellicose, and the 'death' of his second wife. Why he had faked his death? Why he had not followed his own protocol and destroyed the navigational data and the starmaps? And most of all: why did he leave them?

His answer was surprisingly simple. He was tired, growing old. The war felt as though it was lost at that point in time. He wanted to flee from the war, leave it all behind. And live out the rest of his days in a sort of exile. When they pressed him for what had happened from the Battle of Psi Serpentis to when the Everest was reclaimed by the UNSC, he refused to speak of it. And by the frustration he had seen on their faces, the rest of the crew had as well.

Of course as much as they wanted to court martial him for he did, they couldn't. Crucifying Cole like that would have ramifications they could not dare to imagine. And when they decided to try and scapegoat the crew, Preston had threatened them by going public with the truth, resulting in an impasse. As such he made a deal with the UNSC, specifically ONI. In exchange for his silence and exile, he and his crew would follow the cover story given to them: that during the battle, their slipspace drive had malfunctioned and catapulted them beyond known space, assumably from the gas giant temporary fusion reaction. Once they had reached their destination, their slipspace drive was found inoperable and the crew entered cryosleep while setting a normal space course back towards Psi Serpentis.

And so, here he was, along with some of his crew. Enjoying a life of peace and comfort after so long. Some of them, at any rate. Many were so used to fighting, or the repetition of military service, that

after a few weeks, some had signed back on with the UNSC, while others had joined the CDF, and a few had joined the various PMCs now operating. He was half-tempted himself to join them, but he had a few reasons to stay.

"Grandfather, you alright?" And here came one of them now. His granddaughter Sophia Alena Volkov, from one of his sons. Apparently once his ex-wife had heard of his 'demise' at Psi Serpentis, she had regretted everything she had done separating their children from Cole. To a degree, she blamed herself for his 'suicide' as it were, if what he had been told was right. Reconciling with their children, who had been estranged from her after learning that she had left their father. Sophia was just one of several of his grandchildren, all fully grown. The youngest at 20, the oldest pushing 30. "You alright, you looked lost for a moment."

The old ex-admiral shook his head. "It's already Sophia, just, an old man reliving some memories." As he said that, he couldn't help but feel that history was about repeat itself.

****APUFMKII****

It had been a few months since the Quarian Migrant Fleet had entered New Covenant territory. The Arbiter and his Council having recently sent a message to Rtas after his report that allowed the Quarrians to continue salvaging the wreckage in the Zortha System, provided that the Quarrians turned over half of the materials they gathered in exchange. It was a way to see just how skillful, and thus potentially useful, these quarrians were. Since it had only been about a human week since the permission was granted.

And since Rtas's initial report, the time was used in debate in a full session of the Council. Since that time the Quarrians had honored their end of the deal, turning over enough raw materials to build a small fleet, assuming the Arbiter could find the personnel to handle the actual building of said fleet.

Now the Arbiter himself was coming to the Zortha System. Both to get his own impression of the Quarrians and to continue negotiations with their leaders. While he may have been the Arbiter, thus giving him the authority to deal with the space nomads largely as he saw fit, the entire Council as a whole could override his decisions. As it was, they were letting him do as he wished. With a few conditions.

The leader of the New Covenant wasn't quite sure what to make of the Quarrians. To Thel they looked small and weak, but prolonged contact with humanity over the Great War had taught him that such appearances could be deceptive. This impression of weakness was only strengthened in his mind when he discovered that their immune systems were so poor, that they needed their environmental suits, they wore at virtually all times, just to survive. Much like the Unggoy and their methane harnesses.

Yet according to what Thel had learned the Quarian people had survived things that would have destroyed lesser folk. Such as their own mechanical creations, the Geth, if he recalled correctly, rebelling three centuries ago, killing the majority of the Quarian race and forcing the rest to flee their homeworld and its colonies. Shortly after, being exiled and shunned by their own galactic

government for the creation of the Geth. Resulting in the Quarians being labeled as outcasts in Citadel Council space. Forcing the Quarians to scrape by on what the more fortunate had discarded or were willing to part with. All this he had learned from Rtas simplifying communications with them while he waited the Arbiter's arrival. While the Special Operations commander was not authorized to conduct negotiations, he was well within his right to simply talk. And it was not as though he was a minor who let his idiocy dictate his words.

But through it all the Quarians had endured. By sheer will and determination, keeping their aging vessels running through constant repairs and with remarkable skill. Maintaining an impressive and extremely large fleet despite commonly being viewed, and treated, as the scum of the galaxy.

The sangheili leader wasn't sure that his own people could do as well under such circumstances. Unfortunately, considering how fast the infrastructure of the New Covenant was falling apart, Thel knew that that might not be a purely theoretical concern.

Partially to distract himself from such dark thoughts, the Arbiter looked outside his flagship, observing the Quarians at work. His CSO-Supercarrier, The Luminial Solace, one of the conditions the Council had set upon him; having him take one of the few Supercarriers still operational. The massive twenty-eight kilometer vessel dwarfing everything else in the system except the planets and their moons. Though, it was a considerable distance from the Quarian fleet.

Thel was privately impressed. The Quarians were handling the salvage operation more quickly and efficiently than anyone he had seen but the Huragok. Quickly gathering and processing large amounts of wreckage before his very eyes. Converting what his own people had dismissed as worthless, or at the very least too damaged to be useful, into useful materials. In some cases, he saw sections of hull simply being welded to the other hull of some ships. Though, these were pieces that were salvaged much earlier. The quarians were not fools; they isolated each section they salvaged, checking over it before deeming it fit. So far though, the only things they had salvaged was hull plating and raw materials. Engines, weapons, and reactors, and any other similar items were left well alone, with the greatest efforts being focused on hull pieces and deck plating.

In fact, most of the aforementioned materials, the weapons, engines and reactors, were being isolated from the rest by the quarians as they were tagged as such by Rtas and the other ships. Gathering into a decent sized cluster away from the quarians and the other wrecks. Several CRS-class light cruisers and a single CCS-class cruiser were positioned around it, Phantom and Spirit dropships going back and forth, bringing with them the smaller pieces.

He signaled one of the crewman to open a communications channel to Rtas. At the same time, he ordered the helmsman to bring the ship within shuttle range of Rtas's Assault Carrier. Now he would see for himself just what these quarians were like, and assess their potential.

****APUFMKII****

===Warning===Graphic Scene===Skip to next bracket if no desire to read===

The Citadel was burning, people screaming in fear as armored humans troops rampaged across the station. Shooting anything that moved. The sound of screaming was so loud that you could barely hear any individual words. In the confusion, an asari toddler was separated from her mother and ended up in the path of one of the human Spartans.

The child was too young to understand the danger so she meekly approached one of the hulking human warriors. But the soldier knew no pity for alien children.

He simply laughed and kicked the little asari so hard she hit a nearby wall. Severely wounding, but not outright killing, the little girl. Who whimpered in pain and fear as she lay crumpled on the floor. Hearing the noise the Spartan walked over.

The last image the child saw was the faceless golden visor of the Spartan. Showing her an image of her own teary bloody face just as he pulled the trigger on his gun. Ending with the sound of the weapon going off.

===End of scene===

"So what do you think of our new video?" the Sons of Impera's head of Public Relationships asked the rest of the governing board, within their headquarters on Palaven.

While the turian may have been grinning at what she called her "artistic achievement", everyone else was sickened by what they had seen, some actually having left the room. In spite of the fact that they knew it was fictional, it was too close to being real.

"Good, good work, Abrudas. Very good work indeed." Pallin complimented. "This is something that we can use. And shift public opinion against the humans. Very well done indeed." 'Perhaps too well', he thought privately.

"Yes, yes. Very well done indeed." Treeya added. "But where did you get the information about the humans? Supplied by the STG I presume?"

Abrudas nodded. "Them, and from a few rather disgruntled Spectres. Along with a gift from the Shadow Broker." She gave them the turian equivalent of a grin. "It's surprising how much information we've been sent that's actually useful."

The chairman didn't say anything, but he had already begun to suspect that the STG wanted to use the Sons as their varren's paws. A deniable asset that the salarian covert ops group could use to hurt the UNSC (or at least their reputation and political standing) while the STG kept its hands officially clean. But he didn't have a problem with that, as long as they were supporting his goals, Pallin Jared didn't really care why.

"But what good can this really do? Plenty of people already hate the humans" another member of the governing board asked.

"Fear, we use this to re-stoke the fear in everyone. People have started to get more comfortable as human's being our 'neighbors', what with the Treaty of Farixen being disbanded and the Council Fleets and arsenals ever expanding." Chazzik explained. "They have started to get complacent. We can use this to remind people that the humans are still a threat, that they still have the ability to destroy us. It's amazing just what fear can drive people to do sometimes." Many of the board nodded their agreement, the salarian's argument making sense to the most of them.

"I just hope this isn't going too far, and that this is taken seriously." Kreia, another asari on the board, was given strange looks. "If this video is seen as too extreme, we may accomplish our goals, but may harm our own cause. People might, I stress might, see us as warmongers or insane, due to how graphic the video is. And if this is not taken seriously, then it is all a waste of time and effort. Still, that just means we have to be careful." She explained.

"Unfortunately all this is dependent to a certain extent on the humans themselves...if they don't commit any further acts of aggression against us, then we will eventually be dismissed as bitter cranks at best. And if humanity is no longer seen as a threat then, this group will have no real purpose and we are wasting our time." Jared explained.

"BUT WE'RE NOT WASTING OUR TIME!" Treeya screamed, shocking everyone else in the room into silence. She glared at all of them, daring anyone to try and say she was wrong, sitting down when Pallin motioned to her to do so.

"Humanity destroyed Impera, killing our friends and family in the process for no reason. It wasn't necessary, they were already winning. The only reason to inflict that kind of death and destruction was pure bloodlust. Humanity showed its its true nature to us that day, and its only matter of time until they do it again. When they do we will be seen as visionaries, and our critics will become our supporters or be outcasted." the chairman said with true conviction, his charismatic words having a calming effect on the rest of the board.

"And once that happens, we will be able to destroy any of our political opponents by claiming them as agents of the UNSC." the head of PR added smugly.

"And if they are not working for the humans?" somebody Acton couldn't see asked.

"It doesn't matter...at that point, suspicion alone will be enough to destroy them." Abrudas replied confidently. "The people will do our work for us."

"For now we have to decide where we broadcast this video, and how." Pallin said, trying to wrap up the meeting. "I want suggested locations where we can use this to maximum effect and alienate as few people as we can. I DON'T want this being showed to a room full of schoolchildren, thank you. And keep an eye and ear open for any news about the humans. They're up to something, we all know it. Now, we just have to find it."

****APUFMKII****

****Epilison Eriadini system****

****UNSC planet of Reach****

****Spartan Operations Command Facility****

Frederic-104 resisted the urge to shift as he waited in his seat in the meeting room, trying to maintain the look of command amongst his 'siblings'; the remaining active duty Spartan-IIs. The others had no such compulsions. James-005 was, for a Spartan, relaxed; leaning back into, his arms crossed across his chest as he dozed. Linda had a datapad in hand, and more than likely, running through calculations for long distance sniping. Kelly was simply watching Fred with a bored, but somewhat happy look. To name a few of the two dozen or so Spartans waiting in the room.

The Spartans had been made into their own branch after the Heretic wars within the UNSC Navy, after records of certain S-IIs Ops and the nature of the S-IIIs were made aware to Halsey, Hood and Denton. It was both to separate the Spartans from being used by ONI as their personal attack dogs, and give them a more, comparatively, public appearance.

The reason they were all here and waiting was simple, Halsey, or as many of them saw her, their 'mother' had called for them. And specifically asked for all of them. In and of itself that was strange as they rarely saw her now, and when they did, she met with them individually.

They had only been waiting a few minutes, but felt like hours. Fred was about to consider asking Kalmiya where Halsey was when the doors opened and she walked in. "Well hello to all of you. It's been a long time since all of us were in the same room together." She gave them a 'Spartan smile' before looking towards each one and ticking off their names, despite having not seen the actual faces of some for years, if not decades. Before finally reaching him, "And Frederic, I assume that you're taking over for John then?" He nodded, his lips curving slightly at the edges.

Halsey looked over the assembled Spartans. Knowing she had to tell them that the UNSC required their services once again for something it was too cowardly, or too ashamed, to acknowledge. All but forcing her Spartans to serve as the dogs of ONI again. Hoping, just as she had in the past, that the mission was worth it.

"I wish that this reunion of ours could be for better reasons, but I am afraid it's the same as it always is." She removed a datachip from her pocket before inserting it into a nearby projector. "Cortana, if you will?"

The now familiar to the Spartan's as Halsey's 'other daughter', considering how the 'Smart'-class AI was made from Halsey's own flash-cloned memories, appeared before them. The blue avatar looked around the room. "Hmm, he's not around. Already knew he was though. Right then." She 'snapped' her fingers, shrouding the room in darkness and activating the other projectors. "I'm sure by now everyone knows by now, our lovely 'neanderthal has gone from our presence." Using the pseudo-pet name Cortana came up for John, "And

some of you know why. For the rest of you: well here you go." With that the ONI reports Halsey had been given some time ago appeared before them all. Detailing everything about the Batarian Hegemony and the threat they posed.

"The Hegemony IS a threat to humanity. Not because of what they have done or could do to humanity, or even their proximity to our borders, but because of what they could start: a war between us and the Council Races. And war that would be even worse now than ever before because of how much they have been militarizing...but I won't lie to youâ€¦the Hegemony hasn't actually done anything to us yet...we will be starting an unofficial war against their regime and the UNSC CANNOT admit to operating that way...especially given how Parangosky's thugs have virtually destroyed all the goodwill the New Covenant had towards humanity over the past couple decades" Doctor Halsey explained to the group.

There was the barest hint of fidgeting at her words, that alone told Halsey more than any words just how her Spartans felt. Only a few of the Spartans present had participated on covert ops against the New Covenant, but they all knew about them. Individually most of the missions didn't seem 'that' bad, but all together they amounted to a virtual campaign against the alien nation. Now apparently they were going to start something similar with the coalition of species known as the Citadel Council.

"So, why did you call for us?" Kelly, the fastest, and perhaps, the most innocent of the Spartans, asked her 'mother'. "John's already there, so this is something else."

Halsey sighed, she should have known better than to try and beat around the bush with them, "I'm here because ONI is asking for more of you to assist him. They no longer have technical command over you, and I had already approached John about this myself. The fact he did not inform any of you to the full extent tells me much." She noticed signals being exchanged amongst her Spartans, codes she easily read. "As of now, this campaign, this Operation Spartacus, is still small. The reason I called for all of you is that I want you to be ready. Sooner or later, ONI is going to ask me for more of you, and perhaps eventually all of you. I know if I ask you all for volunteers, all of you will. I just want you to be informed and ready when the time comes."

Then partially to convince herself as much as them, Halsey said "Cortana please bring up the overall data on the Hegemony."

The Spartans were suddenly presented with information like infant mortality rates amongst batarian slaves who gave birth, conservative estimates as to how often batarian slaveowners raped their slaves, and scenes of slaves inside the Hegemony being abused.

Along with data on their standing military, and police forces.

"I won't lie to you and pretend that we're conducting Operation Spartacus for humanitarian reasons. But I truly believe the Hegemony is evil; it has murdered and enslaved millions of people for centuries. And now we have a chance to end this and create something better in the Hegemony's place, and show up the complacent 'Council Races' who for centuries did nothing while these atrocities occurred on their doorstep, the real goal of ONI is to create a buffer nation

between us, and the Council Races. Perhaps I am being naive when I say this, but I believe that this can be more than just an opportunity for the UNSC to increase its power and influence. This is a chance for humanity to show the galaxy that we are not a monster or a conqueror as we portrayed ourselves over four years ago. But as fellow sapients striving for the same thing: our place amongst the stars." Doctor Halsey told her Spartans. Giving each of them a final look, she saw nothing by conviction in their eyes. No hesitation, no trepidation, simply a desire to do what they were made to be: the ultimate soldiers. "So, shall we begin?"

****APUFMKII****

As Halsey was explaining the details of Operation Spartacus to her Spartans, back on Khar'Shan, the operation had already since started. From what began as one man operation sent to Khar'Shan, had now grown to two. The fact that Jella Korrangan's savior and rescuer was human was surprising for several reasons, outside of being a new species, he was so similar to a batarian, with his armor, it was difficult to think otherwise. But in the nine months since he had saved her, her life had changed so much.

Before she was barely alive; surviving on what she could steal, what she could find, and what she could loot from the dead. Now, though, she was healthier and fitter than she had ever been in her life. And it was all thanks to the human, John Doe. What was once a struggle of survival, was now a fight for freedom.

And she had learned so much from the human, everything from mathematics, and physics, to firearms and martial arts, things that she had dreamed of and been denied so long. Growing in strength, knowledge, and resolve in the refuge of the safe house (just on the outskirts of Pride Rock City) ONI had set up for her and John Doe.

Together they had killed numerous overseers, corrupt police officers (like those who had tried to rape her when she met John), and relatively minor slaveowners throughout Pride Rock City. Although they had spread fear amongst the upper class in the city, it wasn't enough to really change anything.

John Doe knew if they wanted to attract followers and make people think the rebellion had a chance, they would have to do something dramatic. And Jella had something in mind.

The mayor of Pride Rock City and his wife were infamous for the awful way they treated their slaves. Beating, raping, and even murdering their sapient property whenever the mood struck them. Secure in the knowledge that as long as they kept the people who 'mattered' in Pride Rock happy they could do whatever they wanted to their slaves without fear of consequences.

Jella and John aimed to prove them wrong.

John Doe's AI was able to hack the local communications network to get the blueprints for the mayor's mansion. After which, it was just a matter of capturing and interrogating one of the mansion's guards. They picked one of the off-duty guards who had been partying a little too hard one night. The guard broke quickly under Jella's suggestions; giving them everything from passcodes and guard patrols,

to the armory location and back-up response times. The guard's silence was easily bought with a slice of the neck. ONI would be providing the weapons and explosives through their agents and couriers: the batarians that ONI had taken control over. They would have to obtain transport themselves however. A problem easily solved thanks to how easily Doe's AI could hack and disable the security system of the vehicles.

Even under ideal circumstances, the security for the mayor's mansion would probably be no match for a Spartan. But with the security codes, patrol schedules, and other data that the Jella and John had, they were able to sneak into the mansion with relative ease. They didn't even have to kill more any guards. Knowing the guards exact patrols, they simply avoided them. Using the passwords they had to unlock the armored doors, or simply hacking for those they didn't. Jella had been tempted to don a stolen guard's clothes and armor, but Doe had shot it down the moment she suggested it. Even if they managed to acquire a set, she would be outed the moment anyone saw her if the guards were even somewhat competent. So with the codes and AI in hand, they simply entered the building like they belonged, and as far as Jella was considered, they did.

'Their security is pathetic...the elite here obviously rely on their fearsome reputation more than anything else to keep the slaves in line.' John Doe thought as they made their way through the mansion to the master bedroom. He had counted more blind spots than in an insurrection base, which, considering their usual haphazard construction, was saying a lot. He or any of the Spartans, even the S-IVs could have done this. He saw Jella's marker flash yellow on his HUD. "Jella, status?" When he got no response, he commed her again, this time her marker flashed green: the all clear signal. He sighed, while an all out firefight would be no problem, it was something he'd rather avoid for as long as possible.

John moved ahead to see that Jella had stabbed a sleeping guard in the throat. As he watched she continued to angrily stab the already dead male. Reminding the Spartan that for all Jella's dedication and talent for guerilla warfare, he was not working with a professional. She was a civilian, and trained in as effective a manner in an incredibly short time span. Simply put, he need to keep a tight rein on her.

"Jella, stand down. We need to move on." the Spartan told her urgently. When she ignored him, continuing to eviscerate the corpse, the Spartan simply stepped up to her and grabbed her wrist, snatching the other one out of the air when she tried to strike him. "I said, Stand down." The authority in his voice snapped Jella out of her, if silent, bloodlust driven rage, staring back at the Spartan, who still held her wrists in a vicegrip.

"Sorry," She muttered, the Spartan releasing her as she turned away. Shamed in being reprimanded like a child then what she had actually done. Slotting the knives she held back into their original place. Doe nodded and took the lead, Jella fairly close behind. This time they avoided any guards they came across, hiding in the shadows until they passed. It wasn't long until they were outside the Master Suite on the home.

Doe signalled Jella to get ready, before drawing his silenced MA5-K and a large half-sphere from his belt that had three touch circles on

it. He planted it on the door, dead center over the locks, and primed it. He planted himself right next to the door, and the breaching charge detonated with a deafening boom, the sounds of alarms blaring, screams of terror, and the thumping of armored boots heading in their direction sounded through the air. John simply nodded at Jella; it was her show now. Jella needed to be the face of the rebellion, its leader. Which meant that she would have to be the one to do the dirty work. In the meantime, John would make sure that no one would interrupt her 'private session' with the mayor.

Mayor Braca Jeedai had had an easy life. Born to wealth and privilege, he had also been blessed with good looks and natural charm. With all his advantages Braca's entry into politics had been rather effortless. He had also found a mate that was a natural match for him. Because like Braca, his wife Lesa was a sexual sadist. Becoming excited and aroused by the pain of others.

In a more humane society, Braca and Lesa would have had to hide their vices to order to gain and maintain social acceptance. But in modern batarian society, nobody, or at least nobody with power and influence, cared that the Jeedai got off on hurting people, as long as those people were slaves, and among batarians, slaves were just personal property.

Right now, the pair were panicking, calling for their guards and trying to find out just what was going on. Having only woken up from the breaching charge and immediately ran for their safe room. A precaution any self-respecting politician took against possible assassination. Least, that was where they were trying to get into when Jella found them, still in their nightclothes and trying to open the safe room, when she came through the dust. To them, she looked like an agent of death: with her hands, arms and chest covered in the drying blood of the dead guard from before, her bloodied knives in hand again.

"Just take whatever you want and leave!" Lesa screamed, thinking (or at least hoping) that this was a simple robbery.

"Yes there's no need for further violence" the mayor added, managing to maintain a calmer facade, though inside he was equally terrified. Thinking that he could just buy his way out of this problem as he had so many others. Neither of them realized just how hopeless the situation they were in was.

Jella replied by throwing a knife into Braca's stomach. The batarian screamed in pain and horror as the knife buried itself three-quarters of its blade into him, his wife screaming alongside them. Neither of them had ever experienced any sort of violence against them, or any real physical pain, so it was a credit to the both of them that neither passed out in shock or fear.

"Shut up, just shut up. You think you can actually buy your way out of this? Both of you? No, you're not going to see another sunrise after tonight. Tonight, your blood is going to be the one to paint the walls."

Braca, drawing on his anger shouted back, "No, it'll be yours! Once my guards get here, Lesa and I will make sure to make you last as long as you can while we have our fun. I've been looking to break in my new firestick on someone like you." He looked past Jella to see

three of said guards rushing towards him, "Hah! See here th-" the words died in his throat as he heard three sharp snaps before the back of each of their heads exploded in a gory mess of blood, brain and bone, their bodies dropping bonelessly to the floor.

Jella laughed at the Jeedais shocked expressions. Seeing the sadists realize that for once that they were not in control. Lesa was the first to adjust to this new reality, saying meekly "surely there's no need for further death...simply tell us what you need and I'm sure we can get it for you...money, vehicles, weapons...anything you want dear."

===Warning===Graphic Scene===Skip to next bracket if no desire to read===

Korragan thought of what she had heard about Lesa. Remembering a story of how the mayor's wife had caught a slave boy stealing food and then forced his own relatives to castrate him. Threatening to simply kill them all otherwise. With that in mind, she threw her other dagger and hit Lesa roughly where a batarian female's womb would be located. Smiling wolfishly as the other female shock and pain.

"How about that? And everything else you've taken from all the slaves you've had in your 'care' over the years? You remember them? The ones you tortured, ripped apart, mutilated for your own sick perversions? Undo all of that, and maybe we'll talk. Otherwise, your husband said something about a firestick?" She went around the room, searching for it, the couple flinching when she stopped, rummaging through the desk, and pulled out the aforementioned torture device. "Ah, here it is." A firestick was a batarian invention, more akin to a neural lance than anything else, when it was placed against a body and activated, it sent a massive electrical surge through the victim's nervous system and pain receptors, causing them to feel as if they were actually being burned alive. Some, like the one Jella held, had other settings, such as making the victim feel as though they were being dipped in acid, and other sensations.

She approached the couple, smirking when they jumped as three more sharp slaps sounded. When she got close enough, she didn't even smile. Just jabbed the firestick into the area around Braca's wound, causing him to scream in pain.

"YOU BITCH! DON'T YOU KNOW WHO WE ARE! THEY'LL CRUCIFY YOU FOR THIS!" Lesa screamed in anger and fear. In response, Jella pulled back the Firestick, flicked a switch, and jabbed it into Lesa instead, replacing the stick with her boot on Braca's lower torso.

"She's right you know...the Hegemony takes attacks on its officials very seriously...the worst you treat us the worse they'll feel obligated to treat you once they catch you" Braca said quietly, his pain and fear having stripped away most of his bravado.

Jella smiled again, giving her a more feral look, "And what makes you think, that's going to stop me?"

===End of Scene===

At the door, John Doe kept watching the hall, his silenced MA5-K aimed and ready, and keeping one ear open to what Jella was doing. He

sighed internally, as it was taking everything he had to not follow his training and belief, turn around and stop Jella before it could go any further. This was not what he had fought for, against the Covenant and the Insurrection, for about this was, in a word, wrong. It was cruel, inhumane, and no one, no one deserved it. The screams he heard behind him were like those he had heard during the Great War; when the Covenant had rounded up human prisoners and let loose feral grunts and jackals, Unggoy and Kig-yar respectively, on them. Ripping apart and devouring the humans, whether they be men, women or children. The same fear, the same hopelessness. His grip on his weapon white-knuckled in maintaining self-control "The mission is what matters. This is for the protection of humanity." He muttered to himself.

Eventually the cries of pain ended, and John Doe turned around. The gory masses in front of Jella Korragan had been so mutilated they were hardly recognizable as humanoid anymore, they would probably have to do DNA testing just to positively ID the bodies. Having suffered such abuse that the bodies had literally fallen apart: by sheer force and torture, they were dismembered and decapitated, and their torso was just a mess of muscle.

Meanwhile Jella was painting on the bedroom wall. Using her victims blood as a medium to write 'THE REBELLION LIVES' in bold crimson letters. Turning to her companion as she noticed him inspecting the bodies.

Over the time they had known each other, the batarian woman had gotten pretty good at reading John Doe's body language. So she could tell that the Spartan was upset. And she could guess why.

"Don't look at me like that...they had it coming...besides if we were going to win we need to make the slavers as afraid of us as the slaves have been afraid of them" Jella said indignantly, even more blood coating her body. .

"And how many more... 'meetings' like this will be necessary?" John Doe asked in a monotone.

"As many as it takes" Jella answered without the slightest bit of doubt or hesitation in her voice. In fact, she sounded rather eager.

John realized he was going to have to curb her bloodlust, because if he didn't. Instead of being a revolutionary and leader, Jella was going to appear as psychotic and insane. If that happened, this operation would be dead before it could get off the ground.

****APUFMKII****

Back on the homefront, specifically over Reach, other problems were beleaguering two humans. Choi and Danvers had, since the test of the now tentatively approved Babylon-class ships, been analyzing the data and trying to devise solutions to them. Ones that were cost-effective. The problems themselves were twofold. The first was when all four cannons from a single turret fired together, the sheer force of recoil, even with inertial dampeners, was enough to cause considerable strain between the turret itself and the rest of the ship. The solution was simple enough: reducing the magnetic

acceleration, and thus the muzzle velocity to levels where it wouldn't damage the superstructure. Along with considerations to use a different base design for the next eventually series. While that meant that the final impact energy of a four-gun blast was limited, it was acceptable to the ships tearing itself apart.

The second problem was more complicated. Apparently, there had been an error that the 'dumb' type AI hadn't been able to compensate for in addition to everything else when the firing happened, only barely being able to correct slightly at the last second to manage a glancing blow.

In theory, this was an easy fix: replacing the 'Dumb'-AI with a 'Smart'-AI. In reality, it wasn't. AIs were notoriously expensive pieces of equipment. Even with the new methods pioneered by Halsey and Denton, 'Smart' AIs were a rare sight, servicing only within the offices of ONI, or anyone of at least a flag rank, and few lucky others. With the number of Babylon-class battleships slated for construction, meant that the requisitioning a 'Smart'-AI was totally infeasible. There was also the recent, and so far unexplained, disappearance of several 'Smart' AIs, though most of them were those reaching the end of their 'lives' before entering Rampancy. A prelude to a 'death' state where the processing ability of an AI grew to such a point where they would either literally think themselves to death or go insane and potentially homicidal. There was the theory of a later state called Metastability, where the AI was now more or less human in terms of thoughts and emotions, but that was purely theoretical.

And despite 'Dumb' AIs gaining increased ability and flexibility, for maximum effectiveness, a single Babylon-class would need a grand total of three 'dumb' AIs, two for the four turrets and one for the rest of the ship itself, for the battleship to operate at optimum levels in a combat situation. Now that may have would have been a feasible solution were it not for one problem.

"Damn it!" Choi yelled, papers and datapads rippled and clattered as they were thrown off the desk in his frustration. "Months since that damn test and we're still nowhere nearer to solving this bloody problem then when we began! Argh!" He slammed a fist down on the desk, getting only sore knuckles for his efforts. He barely noticed the pain as he sat down into his seat.

Said problem was still providing a source of aggravation for Choi: for that many AIs to operate within a ship, required either extremely costly data-processors like those used in the Gen-I MJOLNIR MK. V and VI suits, or relatively cheap, but space consuming equipment. And on a warship, space was at usually at a premium. And neither was working out, as the ships lacked the space for all the hardware needed for the operation of three 'dumb' AIs. Least, not in any secure manner.

His only companion at the moment, Linda Danvers, sighed as she watched her boss pace the room. Wondering (for what seemed like the millionth time) if she had been too hasty tying her career to his. Thinking that at least Derek had been good in bed, Choi had rejected her advances, keeping their relationship professional. Saying that he was not one for a 'no-strings-attached' type of relationship.

Then an odd thought occurred to her.

"What if were over thinking this?" Linda said to the universe at large.

"What you mean?" Christian asked distantly, imagining what Lord Hood would do to him if he couldn't come through on his promises. Wondering if it was too late in life to change careers.

"Hey...listen" Linda said irritably as she snapped her fingers to get her bosses attention.

"This is the sort of thing that we would automatically use some sort of AI for right?"

"Yes...that's the problem" Choi replied, not sure where she was going with this.

"But the Citadel Races would just use a Virtual Intelligence, which is nothing more than program so sophisticated that it can imitate sentient behavior, and they're even simpler than a 'dumb' AI, and the existing computer systems on the battleships can certainly support those" the woman who had spent years studying the technology of the Citadel species explained.

"A program that sophisticated would take-" Choi started to object. Only to be interrupted by Danvers.

"No time at all if we got an AI to do it...and once the program is written we won't need the AI anymore."

Christian Choi paused in thought. Mentally digesting Linda Danver's simple, yet potentially revolutionary idea. Then cautiously saying, "It could work."

"Yes it could, and if it does we or at least people like us could use it to cheaply expand the UNSC fleet even more quickly, using VIs to do jobs that AIs used to. Sure the ships won't be quite as fast or efficient without AIs, but with the New Covenant rapidly declining our only real rival is the Citadel Council. And our advantage in firepower and strategic speed over them is so fast that we won't need AIs on our warships." the chief engineer said enthusiastically. Already imagining how she could ride this to fortune and fame.

"Everybody wins." Choi agreed. But inside he had his doubts. The thought of such a highly advanced program being able to adapt to battlefield conditions, which were almost always shifting in the most radical ways possible, seemed almost like fantasy. Then again, there had been moments throughout history where despite the lack of an AI, humans had managed to adapt. Case in point being the Keyes Loop during the Great War.

He was also wondering how artificial intelligences, which were created in the image of human minds, would react to being told to create mindless programs to replace them. The 'dumb' AIs would probably accept it without issue, but the 'Smart' AIs, were an unknown. He knew that he certainly wouldn't be happy with the job. Then the administrator told himself he was being foolish and invited Linda to dinner to celebrate her breakthrough, deciding to give her a

chance outside the workplace. And hoping it wouldn't end like his last relationship.

****APUFMKII****

It had been some time since he, the Arbiter, had made his presence full known to the quarians, and his discussion with Rtas about said race. He had caused quite a panic, with his arrival. Then again, anyone sane would panic upon seeing a CSO-class Supercarrier. After his meeting with Rtas, he had him arrange a meeting between himself and the leaders of the Migrant Fleet.

Then he had been told that the meeting would take time to arrange because the Admirals, the apparent leaders, had to calm and rein in the civilians before somebody did something drastic. In exchange, he was asked if he wished to have a tour, both a shuttle ride and within certain vessels, while he waited.

He accepted.

While the quarians had offered their own shuttle, Thel opted to use a Seraph fighter, as the quarian's own ships escorted him. With a quarian onboard to serve as a guide. During the flight, he was observing the large number of aging vessels the Quarians had been forced into using by both circumstance and desperation. Admittedly, like his friend Rtas, he was impressed. The age of the ships were apparent, along with how quickly these aliens had adapted the pieces of the wrecks, granted being only the hulls, to their own vessels.

When he was touring one of the quarian vessels, a liveship, they called it, his opinion of them only grew. The 'liveships' as they called them, were little more than roving farms. Hydroponics facilities, algae farms, whatever they could grow for food, and do so efficiently, they did. He also questioned those that he encountered, though that itself was a challenge as most were apparently so frightened by him, despite wearing EVA armor, few actually spoke with him. Those that did, were either very young or very old. Trying to get a feel for what the Quarians wanted and needed from his own people, and most of all, what the Quarians could offer the New Covenant. The presence of his personal guard, a half dozen Honor Guards from the garrison on his flagship, didn't help. Still, he managed to glean some information, and form some level of opinion on the character of the quarians themselves, but there was still much to consider.

That had been a little ago, now he, and his honor guard, was following a guide to what he assumed to be a meeting room. The guide had told him as much. When the group arrived at a set of doors, guarded by six quarians armed and armored, Thel held back a snort. 'It seems that these younglings seek to display their strength.' Still, again and again, it seems these quarians, for all their perceived weaknesses, had more than a few hidden strengths. None of the six actually showed any outward signs of fear. No trembling, no one tightening their grips on their weapons or any twitches. 'They are young, but learned. If only they had a guiding hand...' He thought before he moved towards the door, startling his guide who had been speaking to one of the six armed quarians. Before anyone could say anything, he touched the haptic door controls with a claw, opening them and surprising most of those present. He had figured out

how to operate them, much like how he learned to operate human technology, he watched. And he more than ample opportunities to learn.

Stepping inside, it was more than clear that the apparent leaders were also surprised at his sudden entrance. Most of them at least, at least one, perhaps two, were less so. Almost as though they were expecting it. One of them, a female if physical appearances and any sort of similarity to humans held credence, addressed him.

"Greetings, Arbiter Thel'Vadam, correct?" He gave an affirmative nod, surprised by how clearly his name had been pronounced, even with the translation software provided and his own, rapidly growing knowledge of the quarian languages. Most butchered it to some degree or another, the first time. There was also a hint of fear in her voice however, 'something to keep in mind', he thought.

"Please, take a seat if you can. I realize that they may not fit your physiology, but it is the best we could manage." The female said, gesturing to a rather large seat, one that looked it could both hold his considerable weight, and fit him. Where they found such a seat or why they had one, was strange. Still, he nodded and took it, with two of his honor guard coming in behind him and flanking his chair. It was slightly comfortable, but it was bearable. The female introduced herself, "I am Admiral Daro'Xen." gesturing to herself, and these are my fellow Admirals, Rael'Zorah, Shaala'Raam, Han'Gerrel, and Zaa'Koris." Gesturing to each respective individual as she named them, purposely leaving out the ship names and specific duties.

"I am Thel'Vadam, Arbiter of the New Covenant." He said, returning the respect shown.

"You have an impressive fleet admirals...your people have done a remarkable job maintaining despite numerous shortages" Thel continued, managing to both praise the Quarians and remind them of their dire situation. Showing the diplomatic skills that he had slowly (and somewhat reluctantly) developed during his time as Arbiter.

"Thank you. I hope we can reach an accommodation beneficial to both parties." Zaal'Koris said, which sounded good on the surface but really meant virtually nothing at all (to which Thel simply nodded in amusement).

"In that we are agreed, however if that is the case, then what could your people possibly offer mine in return? To use a human term, I am holding all the cards here." Thel pointed out, having no desire to, as the humans say, beat around the bush. "From what I can see, your people are the ones who have everything to gain, while mine does not."

The Admiralty board looked to each other, having to admit that the Arbiter did indeed have a point. Between the two, as it stood, only the quarians would benefit as there was very little for them to give.

But boldness had taken admiral Zorah this far, and he refused to stop now. Knowing that the worst thing Quarians could do at the moment was nothing (for unless their fortunes changed they were all doomed).

"What do we have to offerâ€¦simple ourselves...the Quarrians are the best engineers in the galaxy" Rael proudly proclaimed. "That is a fact, no other race in the galaxy is superior to us when it comes to engineering. There is no other race better than ours, a trait we have gained through necessity and dedication."

There was a time, not that long ago, when Thel would have laughed at such a statement. Knowing the genetically engineered Huragok were far better engineers than virtually anybody else. Their tentacles and cilia could manipulate and interact with the inner workings of any sample of technology down to the smallest possible scale. Making micro-improvements that more often than not, dramatically improved capabilities, repairing what was given up for lost, and learning the intricacies of even the most advanced technologies with but a glance. But seeing his people humbled had given him more appreciation for the pride of others. And he knew his own people could no longer afford their former hubris. So he only said in response "Perhaps."

Daro'Xen gave a tilt of the head. "You sound as though you doubt us. Pardon my tone, but have you not seen what we have done with the wrecks orbiting this planet in the short time we were given? How we took the scraps that were unknown to us and already repurpose them for our own use?"

Thel shook his head. "No, I have seen your people working, and am admittedly impressed by what they have done. But our former caste of Engineers would have done it even more quickly...they were BUILT to be the ultimate engineers with an intuitive grasp of technology that is unparalleled. I have seen them study technology that was unknown to them, and yet tinker with it as though it had been doing it throughout its life. Everything that they touched, that they changed, was made into the pinnacle of its form. All inefficiencies removed, all excesses cut away. To try and match their skills was a fool's gambit."

The admirals' spirits all fell at the Arbiter's words. The Old Covenant's Engineers' abilities sounded almost magical. There was no way the all too fallible Quarrians could compete with that. "Then, what else can we offer?" Xen asked, in a defeated tone.

Thel raised a hand in a halting gesture. "While I may have said that your people are not the best, as you so presumed to be, I did not say that your people's skills are of no value to mine." He sighed, knowing what he was about to say would tilt the discussion heavily in the favor of the Quarrians, but considering that he already made up his mind beforehand, it was not saying much. "Our engineers, the Huragok we call them, have been lost to us. Only a few remain among us," a lie, as only one actually remained and it was approaching the end of its life span, "And we find ourselves in need of replacements."

Xen'Daro thought about the implications of what the Arbiter had just told them. Mentally filling in some of the blanks. Then she guessed aloud "your ships haven't been properly maintained without them have they?"

"No they have not" Thel grimly admitted, knowing that (if anything) that was a massive understatement. "We try, but few can match the skills of the Huragok." He didn't mention how their regular engineers were almost wiped out, leading to even fewer knowing how to maintain

said vessels.

"You want us to repair your fleet" Zaal'Koris figured out.

"Yes...and if you do so you shall become members of the Covenant...with more than enough food and medicine for all your peopleâ€¦access to our technology...your own worldsâ€¦and even a voice in our Council. But first you must prove yourselves." Thel said solemnly, unaware of how much he sounded like a human delivering a sales pitch.

"How?" Shala'Raam asked urgently. She, along with the rest, were eager to seize the chance, any change, that could prove beneficial to their people, and this stood above the rest.

"You must prove that you can offer something to our Covenant that no one else can within a year...otherwise we will evict you from our territory." the Arbiter warned. The Admirals barely repressed their shudders, recalling both Rtas's and Thel's own massive warships that dwarfed almost anything in existence.

The truth was, while Thel had compassion for the Quarians plight, and growing respect for their abilities, he had to think of his own people first. Unless the Quarians proved themselves both trustworthy and competent he would have to abandon them to their own devices. The New Covenant's situation was too desperate for it to be able to afford the burdens of those who could not contribute.

"What if we...don't accept this proposal?" Rael asked somewhat timidly.

"Then I must ask the Migrant Fleet and its people to leave the Zortha System now." Thel told the admirals. Not eager, but perfectly willing to carry out the implied threat.

The admirals could refuse, leave and die in space as their ships fell apart and they slowly starved. They could try to fight the New Covenant for the Zortha System and almost certainly get annihilated by the Arbiter's forces. Or they could take the alien leader's offer and have a real chance at survival.

It wasn't a hard decision to make.

"Then we accept" Rael informed the Arbiter, as all the other admirals eagerly agreed.

Thel rose, reaching out his arm to Rael in a human gesture. The quarian, momentarily confused realized what was going on, and grasped Thel's arm. And the first step was made towards what would hopefully be, a new alliance.

A/N: Currently many of the earlier chapters are undergoing rewrites/edits as I and my partner write the next chapters. Chapters 1 and 2, rewritten/edited have been posted as of this posting.

17. Fragile Peace: Veiled Harmony

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk. II

Chapter 17

Fragile Peace: Veiled Harmony

"_War and Conflict, they are perhaps the greatest factors in the development of technology. With very few exceptions, in almost every species, periods of great technological advancement and innovation, have almost always been accompanied by the presence of conflict. The search for a means of overwhelming and defeating the opposition by whatever means necessary. That being said, one has to wonder, just what new technologies this modern Cold War will give rise to."_

Christian Choi, excerpt from discussion between himself and his aide, Linda Danvers

Planet of Khar'Shan, locale of Pride Rock City

It has been several months since Jella Korragan and the Spartan had made themselves known to the Upper Class of the Hegemony, in spectacular and bloody fashion. The message, "The Rebellion Lives", painted in the blood of Jella's targets, had begun to spread. Not by media or the like, no, the Batarian Hegemony's Department of Communications was too good to let that happen. No, the message spread person to person, whisper by whisper. As the message and the remains of Jella's target that night began to spread, so did something else, something that had not been felt by the Upper class of Pride Rock in centuries: fear.

Fear that they were no longer untouchable as they once were. Fear that death by something beyond time was a possibility. The fear that things would soon begin to change, and not for the better as far as they were concerned. And this created opportunities where there had been none before. Opportunities that the Rebellion of Two exploited to the fullest extent.

Since that first operation, there had been many more as Jella chose more and more targets. Each time, leaving the same message behind, though never a scene as bloody as the first had been. With every slaver whose home they breached, their guards taken down to the last, every message they left behind, their reputation began to grow. Until every single person within the city, including the slaves themselves knew of The Rebellion, or as the Upper Class called them, the Psychotic Demon.

But that was not all the pair had been doing, no, they had seized the opportunities given unto them with both hands for all it was worth. With each raid of every slaver home, resources were made available to them. Weapons, ammunition, armor from the guards, credits and valuable goods from the slave owners, along with something just as, if not more valuable: information. Everything from slave markets and auctions, to the slavers themselves who brought back 'product' from beyond Hegemony space. But that had not need been their biggest gain. Rather than anything material, it was what would allow this operation to even have a hope of succeeding: numbers.

With each slave owner's home that they raid, all the slaves they had found there had also been freed. The vast majority of them were, more often than not, so beaten down and broken that even when freedom was

offered to them, they did not, or it would be better to say, they could not take it. The idea had become so foreign to them, it almost seemed like a dream. But that was not always the case. From every raid, there were those who still remembered the taste of freedom, of being their own masters. And when the pair had asked if they would join, there had been no hesitation, and so their numbers had grown.

As the news of the raids began to spread, more and more slaves remembered their past, remembered their freedom. Some even began to explain and describe what freedom was to those who had been born into their shackles. And among many of the slave-born, as they were called, the idea of freedom took root, and went deep. So with each successive raid, the numbers of those that joined began to increase.

Still, they had a long way to go. The Rebellion's influence did not go beyond the city. The Hegemony's grip was far too strong.

Jella fell against floor, breathing hard, sweat drenching her body and clothes. She was utterly exhausted, her body never pushed as hard as it been right now, in spite of everything that happened. "By the Gods, John Doe, you don't do anything simple do you?" On sheer willpower alone, she rolled over and got back up on her feet. Across from her, the Spartan still stood tall, his body barely touched by sweat, the slightest sheen appearing on his chest and forehead. Hell, he was still breathing perfectly fine, even though the pair had been sparring for the past two hours. Around them, some of those that had joined their cause, a half dozen in all, were sitting in awe as they watched the pair fight, or more accurately, Jella be knocked down again and again.

"Your enemies will never be lenient, nor can you expect them to be merciful. Your training must reflect that." The Spartan said, speaking not only to Jella but everyone else in attendance. "You must know how to fight under all conditions. Even when you are unarmed and without armor, you must know how to use the weapons evolution has given you all. Nature gave you teeth and fists, know how to use them." Moving his right foot behind him, he brought his fists at the ready: the starting stance for many martial arts. "Now, again."

Jella took up a similar position, with the exception that one hand was straight like a spear tip, the other held against her body: the starting stance for Wing Chun. For a moment, neither of them made a move, watching the other, waiting. Then, Jella struck first. Striking hard and fast, trying to land a blow on the Spartan. Every strike lightning fast, aimed for the head and chest, a testament to her efforts to master what she had been taught. But against a Spartan, it was for naught. John Doe blocked each of her strikes effortlessly, either stopping them cold or slapping them away before they could connect. Stepping back and ducking to avoid the strikes that he could not stop or redirect. Not once striking back.

With each failed strike, Jella was becoming more aggravated, her emotions beginning to take control despite her best efforts. It was a common lesson in every martial arts: never let your emotions take control, you stop thinking, tunnel vision begins to take over, and you will start making mistakes again.

However, to everyone's shock one of Jella's attacks managed to get through the Spartan's defenses. Knocking the unbalanced human male off his feet. Unfortunately, Korragan's little victory was not due to her own skill, or even human weakness.

"Can you hear that?" John Doe asked everyone. His enhanced hearing picking up a rumbling sound that no one else could hear. Dust and sand began to fall from the ceiling as tremors started to be felt by everyone in the room. Loose fixtures swinging lightly. Then it became so loud that they could all hear the crashing noise.

Everybody rushed to the windows, and saw Pride Rock City engulfed in flames. Numerous buildings had already been reduced to smoldering ruins. As they watched an object rapidly fell from the sky and made another building explode.

"By the Gods, what is this?" A former slave, now rebel fighter whispered, both in terror and shock. Across the city from their hideout, they could see more and more buildings struck by the falling objects, some just crumbling to pieces, others exploding outright.

One person however, was not as awestruck as the rest. "Everyone!" The Spartan's voice seized everyone's attention, dragging it away from the window. "Grab your weapons and gear and head out of the city! You know where the rendezvous points are, now move!" With that everyone began to head to wherever they had each stashed their plundered equipment. Jella however, followed the Spartan, or least tried to as he headed to what was their armory, but she couldn't keep up with Doe's speed.

Upon reaching the room, John was already halfway into his armor. Bodysuit already donned, and armor components being mounted. As she moved to the same with her own armor she asked, "What's going on, Doe? Just what in the name of the Gods is happening out there!"

As he was placing his chest pieces on he answered, "Scorched Earth Operation. Standard Protocol for when the enemy has taken over a friendly position: raze all potential assets in the vicinity before abandoning it." Dull clanks sounded as the armor locked in place. "The Hegemony is bombing the city from orbit. They're going to raze the city to the ground, leave nothing standing."

"And how do you know this?" She questioned, her armor on and grabbing her preferred weapons and slotting them in their place.

Before John Doe put on his helmet, he answered. "I've seen it many times before. Just not this sloppy." Putting it on, he became a faceless soldier once more. "They want to take us out in a single move, and even if they didn't, more than likely they'll just cast the blame on us."

"But..." Jella wasn't sure what to say. She knew from personal experience that the Hegemony and its leaders were brutal, but somehow this level of calculated malice was still a shock. Moreover, as much as she had hated the people who ran Pride Rock City, it had still been her home for her entire life, and watching it be destroyed before her eyes hurt.

"We have to go Jella, we have minutes at most before they destroy the

rest of this city. Including this building." John firmly told her. Knowing that they couldn't afford to hesitate at this point. "The Hegemony are many things, but when I very much doubt they will be sloppy in an operation like this." He grabbed several bags and started loading them with as many weapons as they could hold. Running through the various contingency plans in his mind. He stopped when he realized Jella hadn't moved, a shotgun and knife still in hand. "Jella, we have to move. We can not stay here."

"You're...you're right John" Jella admitted as she forced herself to move. Running out of the building along with the Spartan just seconds before it blew up. Yet as they fled the burning city, the place where Jella had grown up, suffered, and experienced all her few good memories, her hatred became even stronger. Growing into a fiery desire not merely to kill and torment her enemies, but to take everything they held dear from her, just as they were doing to her.

That day, the Hegemony believed that they had won. That the enemies that had plagued the city were either destroyed or disbanded. In reality, they had simply created the greatest enemy that the Hegemony would ever know, from within or without.

****APUFMKII****

Things were looking up for Christian Choi and Linda Danvers. The pair were back again demonstrating the improved Babylon class ships to the Upper Echelons of the UNSC. Principally to show Lord Hood that they had fixed the problem with the targeting system, and prove that the Battleship design was viable for mass production and eventual deployment in the field.

As the ships began making their way to their positions, both Babylons and their targets, Lord Hood looked to the pair with an appraising eye. "So, you've found a solution to your problem then? I will admit, if your solution proves itself, I will be impressed."

"Yes sir, I think you'll find our solution was quite ingenious. Though, I can't take credit for it. My assist-my partner," he corrected himself, "was the one who came up with the idea."

"Partner..." Hood said as though digesting the word. Looking from the attractive administrator and chief engineer, suspecting that their relationship was more than professional. Which was technically against regulations, but such rules were usually not enforced as long as people were reasonably discreet and kept up a professional appearance most of the time. Especially for those in non-combat roles like Choi and Danvers.

Lord Hood honestly didn't care which of his subordinates were fucking, as long as they got results. Still if Christian Choi failed again it certainly wouldn't help if it came out that he was having an affair with his chief engineer. "Well, Ms. Danvers, would you perhaps, elaborate on your proposed solution?"

"Well sir, the problem was that as 'Dumb'-type AI is not up to the task of managing a Babylon when firing all the cannons on one turret, let alone two, due to the other tasks it would normally be tasked with, even outside the heat of combat." She explained,

bringing up her datapad, "Problems such as micro-changes and thruster movements required to keep the cannons on target, along with keeping it from tumbling out of control or tearing the ship apart, take up considerable processing power. The only AI capable of doing all of the tasks required of an AI on a Babylon would be 'Smart'-type AI, which is not feasible. Neither was the option of trying to increase the processing power of a 'Dumb'-type AI."

"I hope that you are not planning on requisition a 'Smart' AI for all your Babylons, Ms. Danvers. You know as well as everyone else that despite our best efforts, they have to be prioritized."

The Chief Engineer nodded. "Which was why we are using a Virtual Intelligence, or VI."

"Virtual Intelligence?" He questioned, never hearing the term before.

"It's actually a creation by the Citadel Races. Less than a true AI, but more capable than any other program. It has a semblance of an AI, in that it can respond to commands, and operate itself based on those commands, but otherwise it would remain inert. Our solution was to create a VI for each of the gun turrets, and assist the AI of the ship, and/or the crew. They would give all the information while the VIs would do all the hard calculations."

"Its sounds less efficient and more complicated than just letting an AI do it" Hood replied skeptically.

"Only in the initial stages sir. Once we write the VI programs the rest is easy, and writing the program is something a Smart AI did in virtually no time at all." Linda gently countered. "Admittedly, that's an oversimplification, the actual process itself is much more sophisticated than it sounds."

Despite whatever Danvers said, Hood, along with the other officers who heard her explanation, had their doubts. Using an alien concept, that sounded like an over glorified computer, sounded dubious at best, and a pipe dream at worst. Still, the results of this test would speak for themselves.

As Danvers and Hood were discussing the proposed solutions, Hardison watched the group from afar. Since the failure of Project Eezo all those months ago, things had gone downhill for the man. He lost much of his credibility due to the debacle, and few, if any had been willing to trust him to be part of any project, let alone be in charge of, since then.

Hardison had been be 'reassigned', i.e. demoted in all but name, to another project studying Council communications technology. He was still technically an administrator, but he had virtually no funding, personnel, and he even had to share space with two other military projects on Reach.

Watching the woman who had been his lover and personal assistant suck up to an admiral on behalf of his old rival just added insult to injury. And he found himself hoping that this demonstration ended in an even more spectacular failure than his own had.

As the ships finalized their position, Hardison turned his attention

to them, waiting in anticipation for something, anything to go wrong, and see his rival's project turn to ash like his own had. The gun turrets rotated, their cannons raised and aimed at their targets. On a nearby holopad, holograms of both ships and targets appeared, this time, if anything did go wrong, everyone would be able to see it in holographic perfection. He heard Choi command them, "Fire when ready." For a moment, nothing happened, then the Babylon's let loose a broadside, firing all guns on one side together, thrusters opposite of them firing full blast to compensate for the recoil.

A split-second later, their targets were destroyed as the massive slugs struck them directly amidships, splitting them apart or shattering them into pieces. On the holopad, the station AIs showed both where the cannons had been aimed, and the trajectory of the slugs: a perfect hit.

"No." Derek whispered, knowing that now, Choi's designs, his vision, would be the one to guide the development of the UNSC fleet for years, and possibly even decades, to come. While Hardison's own contributions would likely be forgotten. Or simply remembered as another technological dead end.

Meanwhile Choi and Danvers were reveling in their success. Explaining to Admiral Hood just how they thought the battleships could be invaluable in combat. As well as other thoughts on Council Race derived technologies.

"Despite the failure of Project Eezo we can't ignore the advantage their FTL gives the Council; in any ship to ship combat against our vessels they have the speed advantage...I'd like you to look at Eezo's research, Choi...maybe you can find something that they missed" Hood informed the administrator.

"Very well sir, I'd be more than happy take a look into it. Though I make no promises. However," Choi brought up a datapad, "There is another project I had in mind, regarding Council tech. A little something I call Project Cerberusâ€|"

Hardison didn't hear anything else, having already begun to leave. The doors closing behind him cut off anything else Choi might have had to say. He thought he heard someone calling out after him but he ignored it, just walking away from the area. "Damn them! How dare they hand over my work, my research, over to that, that pigheaded bastard! Damn them all!" As he continued on his path, people gave him a wide berth, either from his falling reputation or his disheveled appearance.

However, while most of those watching looked on with pity or contempt, one woman was intrigued. A scientist of Derek Hardison's knowledge and skill could be very valuable to the stranger and her friends. Moreover, it sounded like Hardison was ripe for recruitment.

Approaching the angered scientist, she called out to him, "Doctor Hardison!" He ignored her, but before he could walk straight past her, she stepped in front of him, stopping him dead in his tracks.

"Doctor Hardison please listen to me." she said urgently.

"What!" the scientist snarled, still lost in his own private world of humiliation and loss. At least until he got a good look at who he was speaking to. The woman was just as, if not more so, voluptuous as his ex-assistant. Her clothes only emphasising her figure. "I-Sorry, I shouldn't have been so callous. Sorry."

The woman just chuckled and waved it off, "Understandable doctor, its not everyday we have the carpet swept out from under our feet, certainly not like you were." She gave him a dazzling smile, only focus his attention on her even more. "My name's Olivia Miller."

"And what can someone like me can do you for you, Ms. Miller? As you said, I've had the carpet pulled out from under my feet, as it were."

"Just to talk. And discuss employment."

"Employment?"

"There are other opportunities outside of the UNSC, Dr. Hardison. Many, opportunities."

Hardison considered it. He wasn't even sure that he was 'allowed' to work in the private sector at this point, given all the non-disclosure agreements and other things that he had had to sign in order to do classified military research. Still, it couldn't hurt just to 'talk.'

Besides, Olivia Miller was probably the most gorgeous woman he had ever met.

"That sounds great" the scientist eventually replied. Having no idea how much that seemingly insignificant decision would change his life.

****APUFMKII****

Back among the Migrant Fleet, the Admirals were still trying to find a means of demonstrating their value to the New Covenant, specifically the Arbiter himself. And right now it seemed, it was a futile effort.

The Quarian admirals and the Arbiter were meeting aboard his flagship The Luminal Solace. Using the super-carrier for such a purpose wasn't strictly necessary. But as much as the Arbiter hated to admit it, he was slowly developing diplomatic and political skills. And the humans had taught Thel the value of always appearing to have to upper hand and being in control, thus he had made the Quarian leaders come to him, aboard his flagship that was far larger and more powerful than anything other vessel they had ever seen.

The first they had offered to the Arbiter was their expertise in creating environment suits and to an extent, powered armor, after all, the quarian people had been creating suits the moment they had been forced to abandon their homeworld. Thel had shot them down in saying that because of another caste in the New Covenant, the Unggoy, or Grunts as the humans called them, they had more than enough practice creating environment suits. The Unggoy, unlike most creatures, breathed methane in place of oxygen, which meant they had

to wear methane tanks and harness virtually everywhere they went. Along with the fact that they knew how to create environment suits. Though Thel did admit, the idea of powered armor amplifying the user's natural abilities was intriguing.

"Our scientists have also developed stealth technology that hides vessels from most, if not all, sensors." Admiral Zaal'Koris proudly announced as he showed the leader of the New Covenant a prototype scoutship they built.

The Arbiter looked outside his flagship at the, in his eyes, tiny vessel. Turning to the quarian fleetmaster, as he thought of the alien, as he spoke. "Just how effective is your vessel's stealth? Are there any flaws or shortcomings?"

Xen answered. "None, outside of the need to vent heat after prolonged use. The ship hides itself from most sensors through the material of its hull, which absorbs the energies of most scanners, and heat is stored within internal and insulated heatsinks to prevent detection." With no small amount of pride she supplied, "It is most likely, that this ship could fly right into the heart of Citadel space and not be detected."

"So that mean's it can still be seen."

Xen's pride deflated at the Arbiter's statement, "I'm sorry?" She asked, but she had a feeling she knew where this was going.

Thel crossed his arms. "You say that your ship can not be detected, that it hides itself from sensors through material and design. But none of that says that it can not be seen by the naked eye." He explained. "The technology you use is called by my people Nullified Signature or Null-Sig technology. It hides itself from all sensors and the like, but it can still be seen. A technology we have since left behind. The epitome of stealth technology within the New Covenant is called Active Camouflage. We can not be seen by most sensors, nor can we be seen by the naked eye. But it does have a weakness, it creates an incredible amount of heat to generate the cloak, but the last iterations can cloak an individual for as long as they desired." As if to prove his point, the Arbiter activated his own personal cloak and disappeared from view, along with his chair.

The admirals sucked in a breath at the demonstration, such technology was highly sought after by all, as the technology was greedily hoarded by the salarians, who refused to share it with anyone, even the other Council races. But it was nowhere near the capabilities of what they had just been shown. Soon the Arbiter reappeared, chair and all. "That being said, your ship does have some value, if you can create a solution to the apparent weakness. Now, what else do you offer?"

And so it went, the quarian admirals offered the best of what their people could give, and each time the Arbiter shot them down, stating that the New Covenant had more advanced variants, and the quarians only offered minor changes and advantages for weakness and shortcomings the New Covenant had accepted and adapted to long ago. Plasma technologies, basic AIs, hydroponics, nothing truly stood out to the Arbiter. Soon enough, he raised a hand. "I have seen enough, but I must apologize. As much as my people are in need, your people

do not appear have much to offer mine. Thus, I must ask you to leave my ship immediately...hopefully you will have something worthwhile to offer me next time" With that he rose, getting ready to leave the room, and shortly thereafter the Zortha System itself.

Least until he heard someone shout, "Wait!" Turning he saw it was one of the two females, Xen, that had risen and called out to him. "We may have...something. I didn't state this earlier as the project is still unfinished but, there is something my people have been working on." She hesitated, not sure if she should continue.

"Well? Spit it out Xen!" Gerrel prompted. "I don't know if you haven't noticed, but we're down to nothing here." All manners forgotten.

She sighed. "One of my teams and I have been working on designs for a new space-superiority fighter for some time now. In the hopes of using them when our people would try and take back our homeworld. We have been making changes to the design, but we believe that the current iteration is capable of outmaneuvering any other space-fighter currently in service, and even some frigates. Properly outfitted, it could be made to deliver strikes against cruisers and possibly even capital ships. Though, they wouldn't take them out directly of course."

Thel paused as he considered this. The Covenant had been in need of a replacement for the exo-atmospheric version of the Banshee fighter, along with a better replacement for the tear-shaped Seraph fighter, which was more of a bomber really. Especially since they had begun to fall behind the humans with the advent of their 'Sabres', which possessed the human's own version of shielding technology, and capable of matching or even exceeding the Covenant's fighters.

Nevertheless the Arbiter was still somewhat skeptical, telling the admirals "the idea sounds...intriguing. But Quarian weapons are weak by my people's standards."

Daro'Xen seemed to deflate at this, but Admiral Rael metaphorically leapt to her defense. Bluntly telling the powerful alien leader "so what? Once we build the fighters you can easily put your own weapons on them...the important thing is the speed, you'll have fighters faster, and more maneuverable than anything the the asari, krogan, turians, salarians, or even HUMANS have."

The last statement seemed to have an impact on the Arbiter. The idea that the New Covenant would have something that could beat the humans without resorting to their Assault and Super-carriers, or sheer numbers, was something that Thel had only dreamed of since the Heretic Wars. After humanity had suddenly risen up and become capable, in his eyes, of fighting against the Covenant on even ground.

The youngest Quarian admiral seemed to be on a roll, vividly outlining a vision for the Arbiter "imagine it: entire fleets of maneuverable little ships traveling at FTL as they fired nukes or even more powerful weapons faster than light at their targets. Who could stop that kind of attack?...very few I'm guessing." Thel had to admit that he had a point. Weapons fired out of slipspace could easily be detected due to the radiation that they emitted upon

something entering or exiting a portal. But he had seen the quarian's, indeed the Council race's version of FTL, which traveled in real space. A weapon fired at those speeds, it would not even have to be anything sophisticated like a plasma bomb, a single metal slug would do incredible damage going at those velocities.

Turning his attention fully to the Chief researcher among the quarians, he declared. "Very well then, you have gained my attention. You will be given the time needed to create several of your proposed fighters, and I will be sending several of our engineers as well. But know this, should this fail, or not be as incredible as you have made it sound, it is unlikely you will be given a second chance. Do not disappoint me."

The admirals all stated firmly that they would not. Promising the Arbiter that the fighters would be everything that Rael had claimed they would be. However, all of them had doubts. Wondering if they could really build a fighter capable of standing up against the kind of enemies the New Covenant had.

****APUFMKII****

Councilor Tevos was slowly starting to genuinely hate the humans. Not merely because they had inflicted such damage on the Council Races, or because their appearance on the galactic stage had made Citadel Council military dominance of the known universe (which had been secure for centuries) questionable at best. It wasn't even because they had destroyed a major Council world and made apocalyptic war a real possibility.

The crucial factor was that the humans were, indirectly, forcing her to change.

For most of her political career Tevos had been a somewhat conservative moderate. Subtly promoting her own people's interests as she tried to balance the needs of the turians, krogan, and salarians too. Doing her best to keep any major faction in Council space from getting too restless, paranoid, or powerful. While making sure that she and her family reaped the benefits of her work.

Then the humans had destroyed Impera, and to all too many people, moderate, at least when it came to the humans, meant coward. Now everybody in the galaxy, or at least Citadel space, seemed to want the asari to militarize. Except the asari themselves, who had gotten used to the turians and krogan doing most of the fighting and dying for them, and were hardly eager to send their daughters, or for that matter their credits, to fight an overwhelming enemy against what seemed like insurmountable odds.

Unfortunately Tevos had always been something of a people pleaser, so she had promised the other Councilors that the asari would begin shouldering more of the burden for collective defense. But she lacked the influence or authority to make it happen. So now, for what seemed like the millionth time, the Councilors and their security advisors were meeting in the Citadel Tower, demanding to know why the asari Councilor hadn't made any progress yet.

"I told you, I may be representative for the Asari Republics, but I am not its leader." She tried to explain, "Unless the people are willing to militarize, I am unable to do so. That is not to say that

I have no authority but I cannot simply order them to start building warships and recruiting soldiers on a massive scale. Nor have I not been trying to."

"Just admit it Tevos...its not that you can't do it...its that you're afraid of how bad it will look if you try and fail" Aethyta sneered.

Tevos was also starting to hate her military advisor. She hadn't actually wanted to recruit Aethyta for the position, but the matriarch had been the only logical choice. Being the most prominent and outspoken advocate of asari militarization. Tevos had picked her so that it would look like she was taking the destruction of Impera seriously, while in reality she was doing very little. It had backfired on her terribly: now her military advisor was demanding that she actually do something, rather than creating a facade that she was.

Then inspiration struck.

With a smile Tevos turned to her advisor. "Aethyta, why don't you take over then? Make it a project to make it so that the Asari Republics will be able to shoulder the burden alongside our friends? I'll even funnel whatever funds I can manage." She promised, when in reality, she planned on sending just enough for the militant matriarch to actually start, but not enough to seriously expand it. Ensuring that it would fall flat as funding dried up and Aethyta would take the blame while she, Tevos, was seemingly uninvolved. Then, she would have the justification she needed to remove Aethyta, and then replace her with someone more...like minded.

For once matriarch Aethyta was speechless. Shocked that a politician like Tevos would trust someone with her with such responsibility. Then she saw the way that the Councilor was smiling and realized the truth.

'She's not gonna give me any real support...that way when I fail she can blame me and still act like she was trying to do the right thing all along. Best of all for the unimaginative old cunt, then she can just go back to business as usual.' Aethyta told herself.

She knew what an experienced old matriarch such as herself was supposed to do. Either not walk into the obvious trap, or subtly try to shift the blame back onto Tevos. Beating her at her own game. Aethyta also knew what she would like to do, which would be to wipe away that insincere smile with a blow to the head. But she also knew that that was not what the asari people really needed.

So matriarch Aethyta decided to do something completely different. Something not even a novice would consider, she sprung the trap. "Well thanks, least now maybe I'll be able to get something done. No offense sweetheart, but you beat around the bush too much. Sometimes you just need kick them in the ass to get the ball rolling. And the old crones are overdue for a wake up call." Turning to Wrex she asked, "Hope you don't mind me asking, but think you can spare some of your help with this? It's not like the princesses know anything about real fighting? They all think that a couple of centuries as a mercenary, or by the goddess, sleeping with one, is the same thing as being a commando."

Wrex began to laugh. "Babe, I'll give your project my full public support and more credits than you'll know what to do with...anything to get the asari off their blue asses."

Aethyta smiled, her smirk growing wider when she noticed the alarmed expression on her Councilor's face. In one swift stroke, she had turned Tevos' plot to ruin her reputation, and transformed it into something actually viable. Turning to the remaining Councilors and asking "so who else wants to invest in the TEVOS defense initiative. I say if you really want the asari to get into this fight, it's time to put your money where your mouth is."

Wrex was really laughing now. He knew what Tevos had been attempting to do, and seeing the look on her face, even if he was the only one that could tell next to Aethyta, was just priceless. His own advisor, Okeer, had a grin of his own. "Like Wrex said, the Krogan Empire will give their support. It's not like we have much in the way of new projects right now. Besides, I've had a few ideas just sitting around that the TEVOS defense initiative might be interested in."

The turian councilor and advisor looked to each other and after a momentary discussion nodded. "We might not be able to give you much in the way of funding, but we have more than a few officers and commanders to help you devise a training regime and anything else you may require to create a regular army. Along with any raw materials." Saren added. The sheer volume of material the humans had been sending into Palaven space had been far more than they expected or knew what to do with. And more was still coming in. As it was, the material was now just sitting on the many moons of Palaven as they were allocated for use.

"The Salarian Union will be more than happy to assist in any logistics and participate in an advisory role." Mordin said, speaking for Valdn. "Apologies, but unable to assist unless you desire for operatives to train eventual stealth task groups."

Aethyta couldn't help but grin at everything she was being offered. She had expected some aid from Wrex, and perhaps token aid from the others like Tevos had offered. Instead, she had gotten the offer of enough resources and assets that this no longer viable, but a promising venture.

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Convincing her own people to militarize still wouldn't be easy. But for perhaps the first time ever, it seemed realistically possible. Aethyta turned to face Tevos and said "Thank you for this opportunity Councilor."

And despite what Tevos thought, or even what Aethyta had mere minutes ago, she meant every word. She had no intention of wasting this opportunity. She would do anything and everything in her power to ensure that once this project reached fruition, the Asari Republics would once again, be one of, if not the, dominant superpower in the galaxy.

****APUFMKII****

The slaves auctions in Overseer City, the capital city of Khar'Shan and so the Batarian Hegemony as a whole, were infamous throughout

Hegemony and Terminus space. While those who lived in more civilized areas did their best, for the most part, not to think about such garish trade in sentient/sapient merchandise.

Nevertheless, the massive auctions were a symbol of the power and brutality of the Hegemony. Wealthy individuals came from all over the known universe to look over the merchandise. Such as warlords from the Terminus Systems, battlemasters from the Krogan Empire, jaded businesswomen from the Asari Republics, and recently, although their own people denied it, even a few rich humans and sangheili warlords. All of whom had far more money than morality, buying people to use as cheap labor, guinea pigs, or simply sex slaves.

Despite the vast majority of buyers originating from the Terminus, those who weren't, were either smart enough to cover their tracks, or were outcasts (or both in some rare cases). Anyone from Citadel space had been the game long enough to hide their activities, and any evidence of it. Whether it be here, or back within their home systems. Amongst the humans, these were usually those unaffiliated with the UNSC, insurrectionists, pirates or just those who had left the UNSC behind, or represented the better off within UNSC/UEG territory. As for the Sangheili? No true honorable Sangheili would be caught dead at a slave auction unless it was to dismantle it. That being said, these were those who all bore the Mark of Shame. The ones outcasted from Covenant society, all with those that were part of the Heretics. As for how they got here in the first place? Currency is the universal language among the corrupt and the villainous.

But one thing all these wealthy slave buyers had in common was a belief that their money and connections empowered and protected them. A feeling that they were untouchable as far as the common man was concerned. Therefore, when a group of such amoral elite were meeting in the fanciest hotel in Overseer City to look over the selection of slaves that the organizers of the event had brought out for them, they were shocked when batarian rebels stormed the room. In their arrogance, none had brought any security or protection of their own, relying on those already present to handle any potentially, 'unruly' merchandise.

That was not to say all of them were unprepared or unarmed. Energy daggers and pistols were whipped out, and biotics flared as those present prepared to fight. Engaging the rebels, some were cut down by the skill and experience of veterans. But years, and for some, decades and centuries of living in the lap of luxury, had dulled the skills of all present. Coupled with the sheer numbers, it was not long before any who could or would fight, were either incapacitated, or dead.

. Beneath his helmet, John Doe smiled. After the disaster at Pride Rock City, where over two thirds of the rebels had died, he had known the rebellion needed a morale boost. But they were in no shape to fight the military. So ONI had supplied him with the location of this auction. He was almost proud at the way they had taken the auction with speed and efficiency for a militia force, and a hastily trained one at that.

Security was relatively small because it wasn't officially taking place anyway. Most of the wealthy buyers were more worried about scandals or legal action back home than they were physical danger. After all, the Hegemony itself welcomed wealthy foreigners such as

them, and who would say otherwise?

Jella Korrigan was about to start executing the surviving buyers when John stopped her. Telling the angry young batarian, "They're worth more to us alive." She simply nodded and settled for kicking the head of one of the auctioneer's, knocking him out.

Jella turned to a human woman in a fancy red dress who had just bought a naked and weeping asari slave, and been planning to give the slave to her son for his 16th birthday. The woman, who made her money smuggling illegal goods into human space, ever since First Contact, had the best looks that money could buy. Cosmetic surgery having given her a full bosom, pouty lips, a heart shaped face, and a perfect complexion. But she seemed like a weak and pathetic thing as Jella put a gun to her head and told the smuggler "Give her your clothes."

Whimpering pathetically, the woman complied almost immediately. Stripping down to nothing but her bra and underwear before, at Jella's rude urging, she handed them over too. Jella smirked as she pistol-whipped the woman, knocking her out much like the batarian auctioneer earlier.

Jella thought; 'with any luck, she'll still be out cold by the time we leave, and she'll get to experience firsthand what it's like to be a slave.' Grabbing the clothes, she moved over the asari and gave them to her. The asari, upon seeing the act of generosity, latched onto Jella without regard to her own state of dress.

As this was going on John Doe was going around, looking at all the faces and trying to see if there were any familiar faces in the crowd. He made no attempt to push down the utter disgust he felt at seeing his fellow humans amongst the scum present. Human and Sangheili alike, upon seeing the Spartan whimpered and did their best to appear small and inconsequential. Some going as far as to try hide behind one of their fellows, and some of the Sangheili beginning to whisper, "The Demon, the Demon is here! By the Gods, how is it here!", those words only inspired further fear, even amongst those that did not know what he was. He resisted the urge to summarily execute all the humans he found present, his grip going knuckle white on his weapon. There was no point either in trying to hide his presence, as those who saw him either didn't know what he was, and those who did, were in no position to reveal him without risking themselves.

The Spartan turned towards Korrigan and told her "You need to say something...remember what we discussed." He stepped away, fading into what little shadows there was with ease. No mean feat for someone of his stature.

Jella felt uncharacteristically uncertain. Other than cursing and threatening people such as this, she had nothing to really say to them. She was not a politician or philosopher, she had no elaborate theology or ideology to express. But then she looked down at the naked blue girl still clutching her waist, seeing a younger more innocent version of herself in the asari, despite all their physical differences.

"What's your name little one?" Jella asked gently.

"Cara...Cara T'Val" the maiden replied cautiously, as though afraid that the wrong answer would result in a beating.

"You don't have to be afraid of them anymore Cara" Jella told her firmly, feeling as though she were telling her past self that.

Then she gently pushed the asari away as she turned towards their prisoners and shouted "YOU ARE THE ONES WHO SHOULD BE AFRAID NOW."

"The days of slavery in the Hegemony are over...if you murder a slave you will be murdered...if you rape a slave you will be raped...and you if mutilate a slave" Jella's words trailed off. But she raised a knife as she spoke, so her meaning was clear.

John Doe resisted the urge to fidget uncomfortably. He knew from Jella's position the threat was reasonable, or at least made sense. Nevertheless, he wasn't sure that they could retain the moral high ground if they were raping and mutilating people (even if those people were rapists and mutilators themselves).

Jella looked at the assembled slaves, who were all naked. Then she looked at the prospective buyers. Most of whom were still dressed in the finery they had arrived in. Somehow the sight filled her with rage the way that few things had.

"Strip them" she ordered her people.

The rebels responded by simply tearing off the clothes their prisoners were wearing. A few of them fought back and were ruthlessly pummeled. But of the slave buyers just weakly protested verbally, and were ignored, a few remained stoically silent, and many simply wept as they were stripped naked.

Without their clothes the buyers looked much less impressive. Embarrassed and ashamed as their every physical imperfection was suddenly on display. Even the few among them who were perfectly proud of their bodies, felt uncomfortable being so naked and vulnerable before a hostile audience.

"Not so high and mighty now are you?" Jella gloated, happy to see her prisoners 'dressed' like the slaves had been.

As Jella was making an example of those present, one of the faces in the crowd jumped out at him. He took a closer look and scowled, stepping out of the shadows and interrupting Jella. The crowd parted before him like the Red Sea of Moses as he stepped forward until he reached his target.

"Andrew Del Rio. Ex-captain of the UNSC Navy. Wanted for treason, dereliction of duty, desertion and aiding the enemy. Went rogue for reasons unspecified. Suspected cause: due to be passed over for command of the UNSC Infinity."

The renegade ex-captain, once dressed in garb far finer than most any human would ever see, now stripped to nothing, looked up the Spartan. Not in fear, but in hate. "Spartan. Sailor. Dog of ONI, Demon of Humanity, Slave of the UNSC." Del Rio sneered. "So, your masters finally tracked me down then? Let you off your leash to come take me down?" He spat at the Spartan, a fat glob landing dead center of the

Spartan's visor.

"No...you're not that important" John Doe replied with damning honesty. Del Rio was definitely one of the most important traitors on ONI's most wanted list, but compared to Operation Spartacus, which had the potential to swing the galactic balance of power in humanity's favor for centuries to come, he was insignificant.

Del Rio's eyes widened in shock. He had been certain that the UNSC would have sent someone after him, to silence him if nothing else. His eyes bulged even more when the Spartan grabbed him by the throat and held him a good half meter in the air. What he said next could only be heard by the ex-captain and himself. "However, the UNSC has standing orders for you to be shot on sight, should the opportunity arise. Therefore: Andrew Del Rio, under the UNSC Code of Conduct Chapter 4, Section B, subsection 4, paragraph 12 and under the UNSC Code of Warfare, Chapter 10, Section A, subsection 1, you have been found guilty of treason, dereliction of duty, abandonment of duty, and desertion Thus, your sentence is death." Before Del Rio could try and gurgle any last words, the Spartan snapped the man's neck. With one hand. In the silent auction block, the sounds of snapping bone could be heard loud and clear by all.

John Doe let go of the body and it slumped bonelessly to the ground. Jella was surprised and annoyed. After all, John had just told her that they COULDN'T simply kill everyone. But she decided to go with the flow.

"THAT'S WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ALL OF YOU IF YOU KEEP SLAVES...FREE YOUR SLAVES AND YOU WILL BE SPARED...OTHERWISE!" as Jella ended her speech she threw a dagger with expert precision. Hitting the the Spartan's victim in the right eye just as he was passing off this mortal coil. The very last thing Del Rio's brain registered was a dagger thrown by a batarian rebel.

****APUFMKII****

Back on Reach, over two thousand feet below the Menachite Mountain, was the ONI CASTLE base. Virtually impenetrable, it was reinforced with concrete, criss-crossing Titanium-A girders and plates of the same metal along with layers upon layers of solid granite. The facility had built into the titanium mines that once mazed through the long since extinct volcano. It was the most secure facility on Reach, bar none.

And currently the location of the offices of one Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey. At first, the post had been a type of punishment: sending her to work from the deepest, darkest hole the UNSC could muster that still ensured her protection. With the unparalleled success of her Spartans, and her deciphering of the Forerunner database alongside Denton, a database that was right under her feet at this very moment, both literally and figuratively, it now served a different purpose. Oh if she wanted, she could have her choice of office, from the R&D of Mars, to the UNSC's private research offices on Earth. Instead she stayed here, using the layers upon layers of security clearance required to weed out those who try to meet with her from the truly needed, and the worshipping interns.

Right however, only one thing was at the forefront of her mind. The proposal Margaret had given her over a year ago. The ONI Section III

Head had hidden it within the data she had given to Halsey and Denton when they had meet to discuss Operation Spartacus and her Spartan's involvement. A file that only she had received. "Damn you Margaret, you knew, you knew didn't you?" She muttered, leaning back into her chair.

The offer in question? Spartan Program Beta. Halsey's one last chance of leaving behind a lasting legacy of sorts. It was Paragon's proposal as a successor the Spartan program as a whole. Taking the best of the II, III and IV program and creating something different. The training regimen would be the same as the S-IIs and the S-IIIs. However, all of these children would be recruited from orphanages or foster homes. Children that had no one else left but the government. Emphasis on recruited. The children would be told to an extent what they would getting into, much like the S-III generation had been. After which, they would be trained. As to who however, that was to be decided by Halsey.

After which, their bodies would be augmented, using one of two methods. The first, a hybridized method of all generations. The safety and reliability of the S-IIIs, the speed of implementation, and the new additions of the S-IVs, and the strength and aged appearance of the S-IIs. The current method used to augment S-IVs were still somewhat inferior, but far safer, than those implemented on the S-II generation. The second being the subjects being artificially aged to appear in their mid-twenties to early thirties, before being placed into the S-IV program to receive augmentations.

Whichever method was used, the new generation would then be inserted into the ranks of the S-IVs, to receive their MJOLNIR GEN-II armor. Replacing those who would normal be in their place. The reason for the program was that, for all the good that they had done, and their numbers, the majority of the S-IVs could not hold a candle to their predecessors. Oh they were far above and beyond the rank and file of the UNSC, and even the elite ODST 'Helljumpers' corps, but few could match the S-IIs on any basis. The S-IVs were only superior to the S-IIIs due to their armor and Pre-Spartan experience, and on an individual basis. Squad to squad, many of the S-IVs squads proved to be inferior, with a few exceptions. Case in point being Crimson team, the entire squad as a whole being labelled as a "Hyper-lethal vector", a description granted only to two other individuals in the entire UNSC. Their squad synergy was on-par with those an S-III squad, and close to an S-II, and individually were the closest thing to an S-II.

For all intents and purposes, the Beta program would create the ultimate soldiers, and this time, for as long as needed. Since the reason that her own second generation of Spartans never had a class beyond the first were the substantial costs. This proposal bypassed that issue. As it was, she was conflicted whether or not she should approve, and therefore take charge, of the program. She sighed, being unable to decide on just what path to take.

If that wasn't enough, then it was the disaster several years ago that still plagued the UNSC to this day. Several years ago, UNSC scientists had finally cracked the code to the data they had pulled from a nearly defunct Forerunner database. It had been a fragment of a larger AI, a Forerunner AI. And if the fragment was anything to go off of, it was a powerful one. The fragment itself was no longer

sentient, but it contained enough of its code that they could learn from it. And learn they did.

AI technology was advanced massively, faster processing abilities, increase capabilities, and even adding a basic learning program for 'Dumb' type AIs. These advances had been since implemented into the AIs, both military and civilian of the UNSC, giving humanity even more of an advantage over rivals like the Citadel Council. The problem was that existing AIs still had very definite expiration dates.

It appeared theoretically possible to modify the code of existing artificial intelligences with what they had learned from the Forerunner AI, pushing back rampancy and giving these human derived AIs much longer life spans. But no one knew what the side effects of such alterations would be. Especially considering the fact that the AIs in question would have to play an active part in their own transformations.

The Powers That Be in the UNSC were afraid that they would no longer be able to count on the loyalty of their AIs if the artificial intelligences were allowed to modify their own codes with technology no one involved fully understood. Unfortunately Doctor Halsey knew such fears were legitimate. The history of the UNSC's main rival, the Quarian's Morning War in particular, proved that AI rebellions were a real possibility.

However, Halsey also knew it could become a literal self fulfilling prophecy. Suspecting that even the AIs created in her own image, and from her own memories, might rebel if they ever found out the UNSC was deliberately keeping life saving technology away from them as they approached their own demise.

After all, humans that created AIs in their own image. And history had proven that when push comes to shove, most humans would do virtually anything to stay alive. Rumors had been flying around since that discovery for months now.

The scientist sighed, knowing that there was nothing that she could do about the problem right now. So she turned to the latest reports on Operation Spartacus.

"No...no...what kind of mad men are ruling that hellhole?" Catherine muttered as she read about how the Hegemony had destroyed its own city just to kill the rebels. Shortly thereafter publicly blaming the destruction of Pride Rock City on alien terrorists.

Doctor Catherine Halsey was surrounded by other scientists and technicians in her lab. But the founder of the Spartan Program felt completely alone as she realized the implications of what she was reading.

If the Batarian Hegemony kept fighting back against the rebellion with such overwhelming force and brutality, if they were so quick to kill their own, then many of her Spartans, which she thought of in many ways as her children, were going to die during Operation Spartacus.

Spartans were tough, but they weren't invulnerable, and orbital bombardment could kill them just about as easily as anyone else. And

if the batarians were willing to simply destroy anything the rebels captured.

'What if the slavers would rather destroy the Hegemony than surrender it to us? Could we even stop them from destroying everything short of a full blown invasion?' Halsey asked herself. Truly grasping for the first time just how nasty and bloody the war ONI was deliberately starting could become.

But one thing was crystal clear.

If Operation Spartacus continued, and it was probably too late to stop it now, many of her Spartans would die. Unfortunately, humanity probably still needed them.

Slowly and reluctantly, Halsey picked up the document requesting her participation in a new Spartan program. She signed her answer almost violently, and then gave it to an aid. Telling the woman to send it back to Parangosky immediately.

"_When I first approved of the Beta program, did I know what it entailed? Yes. Do I have any regrets? Many, much like I did with the second generation. But would I change any of it? No, I would not. My actions were what saved the human race during the Great War. But by whatever deity or deities that may or may not exist, I wish they were never needed. For I will have to live with the guilt that plagues me until the day I die." _

Catherine Elizabeth Halsey: Personal Memoirs

**Please, Review and let us know what you think. **

18. Fragile Peace: Division and Unity

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk II

A/N at bottom

Chapter 18

Fragile Peace: Division and Unity

"_All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near."_

Sun Tzu

Within Citadel Council territory, only four solar systems are more heavily defended than the Citadel Station left behind by the Protheans. Trebia, Aralakh, Pranas and Parnitha: the four homeworld systems of the standing Council. Since the invasion of Trebia by the humans, each system was defended by no less than an entire armada of spacecraft ; consisting of literally hundreds of warships, and a litany of both space-borne and planetary defenses.

And the humans were battering these aside like they were nothing. Leading the charge were the three monstrous ships, the newly

designated Fortress-class vessels that had made their first appearance at Palaven. Fortress-class, it was a designation that no one in Council space ever thought would be made real. A ship that dwarfed even the largest of dreadnoughts, there would be a mobile command center, capable of withstanding virtually any assault and returning the favor tenfold. It was thought to be impossible due to the fact that even if it was built, using Mass Effect technology as an FTL-drive would have made it impossible to function, and thus pointless to build. And the humans had shattered that notion.

The three were plowing through the enemy fleets as though they were mere inconveniences. In some cases, quite literally, as ship after ship was rammed by the Fortress-classes, the shields of the human ships shimmering gold as the Citadel warships shattered against them. Those that weren't simply run over, were wasted by their weapons or their escorts. Picking off ship after ship before some could even fire a shot. Leaving behind a field of wreckage and dead in their wake.

Then the titanic warships reached their targets, Thessia, Palaven, Tuchanka, and Sur'Kesh, it didn't matter which world it was, the results were all the same. All four worlds were being attacked simultaneously. The homeworlds of the four Council Races were the most heavily populated and well defended in all of Citadel space. Yet the fortress class vessels showed no hesitation before attacking the worlds in question. Presenting their broadsides to the planet, turning their guns planetside, before pummeling the its surface, before moving around the planet. Targeting a major city with every strike, murdering millions, if not billions in mere moments.

But eventually the space forces of the Council rallied. Starting to take down the monstrosously powerful human warships through sheer weight of numbers. Many of the valiant crews using their ships themselves as weapons. Ramming the UNSC warships at faster than light, as many engaged their Mass effect cores and armed all their ordinance, the smaller ships finally beginning to fall and join the dead all around them. But for every, one UNSC ship that they destroyed, another dozen Citadel were lost. Destroyed before they could ever reach their targets, sometimes taking out their allies with them. And the Fortress-classes were not even slowed. Their shields finally weakening under the sheer force of numbers firing upon them, in some cases actually snapping under the strain, but even then, their hulls were barely suffering a scratch.

Finally the Council dreadnoughts themselves launched suicide attacks against the human juggernauts, firing thousands upon thousands of nuclear missiles at the Fortress-class warships, ignoring all others, just before they themselves rammed into them at FTL speeds. The gigantic UNSC vessels finally starting to show visible damage as sections of the hull were aflame and great pieces began to flay off those that had lost their shields.

But the humans were at least as merciless as they were powerful. When the their mightiest warships began to take damage they unleashed their trump cards. The lead ships at each system fired a single shot at the homeworld itself, before all of the human ships disappeared in their strange FTL.

In an instant, the orgy of explosive destruction reduced the homeworlds to nothing but fragments, and destroying the surrounding

Council fleets in the process. The humans leaving nothing but ruins in their wake. As they prepared to do the same to the rest of the Council worlds.

"And that's our worst case scenario." Senior security advisor Saren said as the audio/video presentation ended and the Councilors, and their advisors, looked back at him in horrified disbelief.

"By the Goddessâ€¦" Tevos managed to whisper, summing up what all of them felt. When they had asked Saren, who had moved from being advisor to the turian Councilor to being Security Advisor for all of the Council fleets, to show them what would happen if the Citadel Races, as they were now, went to war with the humans. None of them had expected this. "That doesn't seem possible. To have a warship that is both that large and powerful. Just how accurate is this, Saren?"

The only reason why none of them were calling out Saren on his presentation, calling it lies and pro-human propaganda, was his reputation and their own personal relationships with him. Everything about the turian would describe him as being pragmatic and not one with a flair or desire for the dramatic. Hence, why they, for the most part, accepted what he had shown them.

"Admittedly, that is unknown. Everything shown was extrapolated from my brother's flight recorder data from when he first encountered the humans, and from the human invasion of Palaven. We scaled their weapons and shields strength based on what we know and the assumption that size directly correlates to their power." Saren explained.

"But what about their fortress-class warships?" Valdn asked, "Surely they can't have that many vessels of that magnitude?" a hopeful tone to his question.

Saren shook his head. "We know that the humans have at the very least three Fortress-class vessels. And there is no reason to believe that they can not create more." He rewound the video to show the massive warships again. "If we were to judge their capabilities on building more of these vessels based on their reparations that they have given us over the years, then it is easily within their capabilities."

Councilor Tevos had nothing to say in response to that. For the first time ever, she really considered the idea that Aethyta might be right. Forcing the asari to give up their peaceful ways seemed like a relatively small price to pay if it could help prevent such tragedy.

"Do you have any, suggestions? As apparently our fleets are woefully inadequate, if your projections are even slightly accurate" the salarian Councilor coldly asked, as faint hope gave way to greater fear.

"Just one." He replied. "The reason our forces are so completely outmatched ultimately isn't because of size or power, it is because the humans can essentially send their forces anywhere in our territory and we can't do the same. We need to explore every alternate method of FTL available. As long as we're reliant on the Mass Relays, we are hideously vulnerable to any galactic power like the UNSC that isn't."

Saren's words hit his audience like a stun grenade: shocking then all speechless. Of course they had been researching Slipspace FTL for years, ever since encountering the humans and their version of FTL. Both as a way to understand and counter their human rivals/enemies. But only as a military weapon, Saren seemed to be saying that their very societies needed to give up the Mass Relays, which were one of the cornerstones, perhaps THE cornerstone, of galactic civilization as they knew it, not even Aethyta had ever seriously considered anything so radical.

"You can not be serious?" Wrex asked. Even as pragmatic he was, the very idea seemed ludicrous to him. "There is a reason why we use the Relays, they-"

"Are a crutch that we should have tossed away ages ago." Okeer interrupted, drawing attention to him. "The turian's right. We've been relying on these Relays like a whelp that hasn't left its broodmother since we started. Using what the Protheans left behind instead of standing tall on our own achievements. If you ask me, its been a long time coming."

Saren nodded his thanks to the krogan scientist for the support. "I should clarify that the human's advantage is only in the strategic sense. Tactically, our forces are more than sufficient to overwhelm them in a conventional engagement." Seeing some of the confused looks he was receiving, he elaborated. "The losses we would suffer would be devastating yes, but as you saw in the video, our numbers will overwhelm them. If they were reliant on Relays much like we are, then our forces would eventually win. It's the human's abilities to simply bypass every single defensive line we can muster that is the problem."

"But, reality being the bitch she is," Aethyta added, "Right now , to actually protect ourselves; we would need what amounts to an armada at every single world, otherwise all of them would be easy pickings."

"Exactly-exactly how many warships would we need?" Tevos asked with uncharacteristic timidity. Feeling scared and afraid in a way that she hadn't in centuries. Taking her first tentative steps into the new reality she found herself in.

"A minimum of eight hundred, optimally ten hundred." Saren answered, making all of the Councilors, Tevos especially, pale more so than they already had. "Per system."

"I've run the numbers Councilor Tevos, your people could do it if you made a commitment to your military that the asari haven't done, since the Rachni Wars. You are the richest and most numerous species in the galaxy. Frankly you could have had a fleet more than twenty times as large as what is out there now, alone, by now if you had simply kept building warships at a steady pace between now and then" Saren replied.

The truth was, with the head start they had had, being perhaps the first race in the galaxy after the Protheans to achieve FTL and begin exploring other solar systems, the asari could have conquered the galaxy, or at the very least made a decent attempt at it. But whether out of apathy, morality, laziness, or simple cowardice, they had

never really capitalized on that opportunity. Now the asari were being threatened by young upstarts, specifically the humans. And if they did not become aggressive now they might have no alternative but to submit to the newcomers.

"I-Iâ€¦" Tevos was speechless, not because she was in shock, least not totally. But because he was right. Aethyta had been calling for this for ages, and this meeting just hammered in that point even more. She suddenly slumped in her seat. "Doctor Solus, if we are going to do this, have you made any progress in your studies of Slipspace?" She asked, all but admitting defeat and submitting to the larger consensus.

"Progress has been...problematic." Mordin replied. "Slipspace is inherently difficult, if not near impossible to understand. Finally interpreted the probe data we have gathered. Slipspace, is where the laws of physics only partially apply. Appears to have their laws when it comes to reality. Progress also slow because of loss of engineers tasked with operating slipspace engines. Several have simply vanished. No kidnapping, simply gone. But, still. Progress." He smiled at them, pleased at all that some advances had been made.

All of them shared trouble glances at how the doctor had so casually passed off what was apparently a regular violation of the laws of physics and disappearances. Still, they kept their wits about themselves. "What about your idea of destabilizing slipspace portals? Making it impossible for them arrive here at all by that method." Councilor Cicero Valon asked.

Mordin's smile quickly faded. "Initial analysis was completely somewhat right. Figured out a means of doing so for our own prototypes. Portals became too unstable for probe to enter slipspace, but is pointless, I'm afraid." he replied to the turian Councilor.

"Excuse, but did you just say the technology works but is pointless?"

Mordin nodded. "Yes. Have already done covert tests, to see if any affect on human portals. None could be found. Seems they have already developed countermeasures long before our encounter."

"Then you're not working hard enough!" the turian Councilor replied angrily. Everyone looked at Cicero in surprise, since he had been relatively calm this entire time. Until now that is. "It's been years, years! Since we've encountered the humans, and you're all telling me, that even now we're still just as, if not more, vulnerable as then!"

"Unfortunately Councilor, up til we met the humans we were almost completely dependent on Prothean based technology. We thought it was the best and all anybody needed. The humans proved to us how dead wrong we were and now we're still scrambling to cope." Saren admitted.

"Have we had any luck getting those imperious New Covenant bastards to give us Slipspace technology?" Aethyta asked crudely, though her sentiments were shared by virtually everyone there. The New Covenant had been making efforts to try, on some scale, integrate themselves with Citadel society. Citizens and traders coming to various points

of Citadel space, mainly the Citadel itself. For the most part, the civilians were like any other; cautious but integrating just the same. The same couldn't be said for when it came to diplomatic relations, specifically trade.

The New Covenant adamantly refused to allow the trade of any and all knowledge of Slipspace and related technologies, along with any sort of weapons technology. Including the means to weaponize plasma. Other technologies, such as plasma batteries and reactors, raw materials and other such things, were allowed. They had even parted with normal space propulsion engine schematics, to an extent. But no matter how much the Council tried to persuade them, the New Covenant stood their ground.

"Unfortunately, no. I think they realize that once we have Slipspace we would at least be their military peers...and they have enough problems already where the humans are concerned." Saren replied, drawing on what little was known about the New Covenant.

"Well, at the very least there is some good news for all of us." Saren mentioned. "The quarians seem to have, to the best of our knowledge, vanished. No one, not our fleets, the Terminus or even the Shadow Broker have seen the Migrant Fleet for months now. At the very least, that is one less problem we all have to deal with, I would think." That received some appreciative nods. The quarians were a problem that no one liked dealing with, after all. They were the scavengers and pests of the galaxy.

Silence soon took over the room, no one having much else to add.

Cicero sighed. "Tevos, your people had better start doing their part soon. Something tells me that sooner or later, someone is going to make a move. And when that happens, the asari better be standing alongside us. Or you may very well find yourself standing alone." With that said, he rose and left the room. Little did they realize, the humans already had.

****APUFMKII****

For the first time in centuries the military garrisons on the batarian homeworld felt threatened. Confusing reports of power outages, cyber attacks, and bombings were coming from dozens of locations all over the world. At first there didn't seem to be any pattern to the attacks, but then a senior officer realized that they all seemed to be occurring near military depots.

Drawing troops away from their stockpiles of weapons and other supplies as they were stationed to guard the attacked zones. Leaving the depots themselves vulnerable to attack. The senior officer suspected that this was a prelude to some larger attack, perhaps even on the depots themselves. But when he had brought up his theory to his superiors, they had fallen on deaf ears and been told that if he suggested something so outrageous again, he would be sent to guarding the slaves in charge of the waste management facilities.

The captain in question knew he was right. But 'troublemakers' were punished harshly everywhere in the Hegemony, even the military. So he decided to drop the issue. Figuring that in the long run it probably

wouldn't matter that much anyway.

Inside one of military depots, several guards were huddled around a table playing cards. Their backs to the wall of monitors behind them, which were linked to the dozens of cameras positioned around the base. It wasn't not as though they had to actually keep watch, after all this was the heart of the Hegemony. Who would be crazy, stupid or foolish enough to attack a military stronghold?

Had they been watching, they might have learned just who. On one of the camera's, a guard was patrolling the perimeter. Rifle on his back, with a bored look on his face, he was walking towards a stack of crates in hopes of catching a quick nap. Shutting off his radio as he walked. As he got closer, a shadow followed him. As the guard rounded the crates, out of sight, the shadow jumped forward, covering the guards mouth and stabbing him through the back and right into his heart. The guard barely made a sound.

Around other points of the perimeter, the remaining guards were taken down similarly, their bodies taken out of sight of the cameras. Those inside the depot proper still blissfully ignorant. More shadows entered the perimeter, quickly and quietly taking out any roving patrols. Silent gurgles, soft puffs, quiet splatters and hissed whispers were masked by the wind and the footsteps of the patrols as they were taken out one by one. Until the only ones left were inside the buildings themselves.

Outside, a salarian ran for a panel. Breaking it open, he sliced open a few wires before connecting them to a device on his person. Placing the wires along with the device back inside the panel, he closed it. The central, and only, building had three entrances. At each, three people were positioned to the sides of each. Mainly turians and asari, along with a single drell, all of them waiting for the command. At one of them, John Doe, Jella Korragan and Cara T'Val waited for everyone else to get ready. Receiving the confirmation, Doe activated his comm. and whispered. "Take take take."

The salarian from before tapped his omnitool. The panel surged as the aptly named Sponge drained all the power and redirected it to its ECM jammer, disrupting all communications that hadn't hardened themselves against it. Inside the building, everything went dark. The guards inside looked at the lights before grimacing in pain as their radios squealed before they could shut them off. "What in the world was that?" One of them demanded, before moving to the terminal and trying to turn on the emergency power to no avail. Snarling, he ordered, "Grab your guns and find out what's going on! And someone get to the barracks and wake up the meat shields!" Referring to the new recruits, who, more often than not, ran headlong into danger rather than being sensible and using cover.

Larak Groto was rudely woken up mere moments before rebels stormed the room. Like most people in the barracks Groto was a new recruit who had never seen actual combat. Guard duty at the weapons depot being considered an easy job, so new recruits were often assigned there.

Groto had no way of knowing that even as he regained consciousness his senior officers were being butchered by a Spartan and the human's bloodthirsty comrades. That the lieutenant in charge of the facility had tried to take the rebels on alone when they cornered him, and had

been stabbed and shot roughly a dozen times.

Groto didn't even hate aliens or own any slaves. He was just a poor boy who had joined the military in search of a better life. Trying to grab some clothes, he tripped as he attempted to put his pants on, falling face first to the floor. Then bullets started tearing through the thin walls, killing the rest of his bunkmates still on their feet or in their beds. He ducked down, hands over his ears trying to block out the screams and gunfire, where a more experience soldier would have immediately reached for his gun.

Finally Larak Groto realized the gunfire had stopped, only to realize that all of his comrades were dead. Thanks to either fate or dumb luck none of the many bullets being fired into the barracks had hit him. Now he was the only one left.

"Please think I'm just another corpse on the floor." Larak hoped.

As he silently begged for his luck to keep holding out.

Then he saw a pair of ragged old boots, as one of the rebels found him. He looked up and saw an asari who looked almost as scared as he was. Unsteadily pointing a gun, that he recognized as an officer's weapon, straight at him.

Cara T'Val felt sick to her stomach. Ever since she had been captured by the batarians months ago she had harbored fantasies about getting back at them. But the reality didn't live up to the fantasies.

Batarian soldiers died just as messily as slaves, and there nothing honorable or glorious about sneaking up behind people and stabbing them in the back. She had not even used a weapon yet, trailing along after the other rebels. Feelings increasingly uncomfortable and upset, especially after Jella handed her a gun that she looted off a fresh corpse.

"Please no...I've never hurt you I've never hurt anyone." Larak begged as he looked at Cara. Hoping to find some mercy in the the heart of the pretty young asari.

Cara was conflicted. Either she let him live and go off to do who knew what next, or kill him now and end him. Her hands shook, but not enough that it would throw off her aim so much, and they both knew it. Did she really want to do this? The soldier before her almost was a kid. Before she could decide either way, Jella came up behind her. "C'mon sweetie, we got to-Oh? What do we have here?" She asked, seeing Larak on his knees. "Well c'mon then Cara. We got to finish up here. Kill him and lets get moving."

"I've...I've never killed anybody before..." Cara confessed.

Jella put her arm around the asari in a companionable gesture as she said "I know you're afraid, you're thinking what if he doesn't deserve it? But I know what men like him are like, he'd have you on your back and screaming as he had his FUN if we gave him half a chance."

It didn't even occur to Jella that the male in question might not be a rapist. As far as she was concerned the supporters of the Hegemony,

especially the males, were all evil. She had seen what happened to asari sex slaves in the Hegemony, one of her previous owners had had one, and she thought Cara deserved to know what the other side was like.

"But-but..." Cara protested weakly.

Jella responded by kicking Larak in the groin and then tying him up as he laid moaning on the floor. Telling Cara "if you really really want...I'll show you what men like him do to girls like us...but I warn you child you can't unsee it afterwards."

"You would let me into your mind?" Cara asked in surprise, after all they hadn't known each other that long.

Jella Korrigan knew John Doe would object. Saying that she was taking too much of a risk on a girl that they barely knew. But Jella felt as though she had been living a borrowed time ever since she killed her last master and ran away. Besides, she liked Cara.

Cara showed just as little hesitation. She considered Jella the closest thing she had to a friend at the moment, moreover she was attracted to the fearsome batarian female. Hoping that a meld would allow her to finally understand Jella.

"Embrace Eternity." Cara murmured as she put her hands either side of Jella's face.

The images that she saw were horrifying. Experiencing Jella's memories of being beaten and raped. Used as nothing more than a tool of somebody else's pleasure. But the thing that really stuck a cord in Cara were images of the asari that had been Jella's fellow slave. Seeing the asari stripped, degraded, and violated. Growing ever more hopeless and withdrawn as time went by, until the maiden finally took her own life.

It was all too easy to imagine herself in that dead asari's place. Because Jella had already imagined Cara being treated that same way.

'That's what would have happened to you if I hadn't rescued you...that's what this boy would still do to you if we gave him the chance' Jella told Cara while their minds were still linked, her words empowered by the force of absolute conviction.

As the meld ended Cara raised her weapon.

"No, please no." Larak Groto begged.

But Cara didn't hear him, images of rape and torture still running through her mind. She shot him in the chest, killing the soldier instantly. But then she shot him again, and again, and again, until she was out of ammunition. At that point, Jella handed the asari one of her knives and then she started stabbing poor Groto's corpse.

John Doe entered the room just as Jella Korrigan was helping Cara mutilate the young soldier's corpse. Disgust was all he felt at the sight. He understood that there would be anger and bloodlust that he would have to curb, but he didn't expect Jella would influence others

to do the same. Even when fighting the Covenant, back during the Great War, he dealt out retaliation by killing as many as he could, not mutilating their dead. He had already talked to Jella several times about this. Now he was seriously contemplating replacing her with someone less sadistic than she is. They had not yet reached the point of no return on that quite yet. Her face was well known among the slaves, but it would be very easy to shift that worship to someone else. His own 'face' was also getting some notoriety. Whispers of an armored 'Demon' had been going around since they attacked the auction some time ago.

"Korrigan, T'Val!" The authority in his voice alone prompted the two to stand up, hands at their sides. "Korrigan, I've already discussed this with you. You know we can't have this movement be seen as anything less than a Revolution. This can and will jeopardize that. Either curb your bloodlust or I will do it for you. Is that understood?"

Jella nodded, the grin on her face from her act not having faded in the slightest. When Doe looked at T'Val, the same grin was plastered on her face but it was more subdued. He resisted the urge to sigh. "Police these bodies and get outside. We're moving everything we can, now. Before someone realizes the depot has gone silent." He left the two after that, to direct the loading and looting of the more valuable and useful ordinance stationed here.

At a dozen other depots similar to this one, similar raids by other cells were being conducted. Some, like this one, quietly taking out the guards and now looting at their leisure, others engaged in fierce firefights with the guards. And some had failed entirely, the cells either wiped out to a man or captured. Out of the thirteen raids, ten would succeed, with the Rebellion losing a total of thirty two men and women, out of the hundred or so involved. The result of raids were two fold: the Rebellion was armed with the Hegemony military's own weapons and gear. And a clear message to everyone on Khar'Shan, one that would be heard by all: The Rebellion Still Lives!

****APUFMKII****

Doctor Alan Morgan Denton was starting to genuinely hate his job. Before life used to be so much simpler for him when he was only tasked with studying and reverse engineering Forerunner technologies. But with his "incredibly display of diplomacy and politics" during the negotiations with the Citadel Council all those years ago, he had been made in charge of all diplomatic relations between the UNSC/UEG and the Citadel Council.

On the surface his main task was easy: avoid war, or tensions that could lead to war, with the Council Races. But Denton also knew that ONI was directly undermining a Citadel species in order to overthrow its government and install a 'friendly' one to replace it. Actions that could easily provoke a war, and which violated the very treaty that Denton himself had negotiated.

But that wasn't the problem, at least not yet, once the Council Races realized what ONI was doing through, it would be a different matter. What was the problem was the sheer number of requests and complaints he received day in and day out. Everything, ranging from trading routes approval and requests for starcharts, or humans violating one

or several laws while in Citadel space. The sheer amount of paperwork was what was getting to the good doctor and ambassador. And that's was the Citadel Council alone. Not helping matters was that he was also made in charge of diplomatic relations with the New Covenant. All the fires that ONI sparked, he was tasked with stamping them out before they could grow.

At this point Denton was far more concerned with the New Covenant than he was the Citadel Council. Despite the fact that ONI continued to spy on and interfere in the affairs of the races of the old Covenant, the ambassador was hearing less and less from the Arbiter and his ruling Council. Nobody else in the UNSC in general or in the Office of Naval Intelligence in particular seemed to think much of it, but to Denton it appeared as though the New Covenant was slowly giving up on diplomacy with humanity.

'We hate them because they almost wiped us out and they have put up with a lot of shit from ONI's attack dogs because they feel guilty about it...but how long until that guilt is overcome and erased by anger if we keep hurting them?' Denton asked himself, feeling as though he was on the verge of a breakthrough.

Then his train of thought was interrupted by an aid rushing into his office, which was one of the most secure on Earth. The young man urgently telling his boss, "Sir you've got to see this!"

"What is it?" Denton asked irritably, annoyed at the interruption.

"News from Jarum, sir." the aide explained as he handed over a report.

Denton perked up as he heard that. When the issue of how to actually get the reparations, in the form of raw materials, to the Turian Hierarchy had come up, the turians had refused to allow any UNSC vessels near the heart of their territory. So the small colony of Jarum, settled by a group of asari and turians less than a century ago, on the edge of Hierarchy territory, had been selected.

As the only Citadel world that humans could legally and publicly come to on a regular basis, a shipping hub, because of the reparations, and a center for legal and illegal trade between humans and members of the Citadel species, Jarum was an increasingly important and prosperous world. With an ever expanding population, including many humans that were permanent residents in all but name.

'I hope its not just another boring trade dispute.' Denton thought as he was handed the report. Then he started to read, and found himself wishing it was just a trade dispute.

As he read the report, going down line by line, the tension in the room seemed to grow a hundredfold. To the aide that had brought the report, and others like him present, the very air itself seemed to grow heavy and became harder to breathe. And imperceivable aura seemed to radiate from the good Doctor. "Just...how accurate is this report?"

Stuttering, the aide tried to reply. "S-s-sir, the uh-" The aide gulped before continuing. "The communications department has confirmed the transmission sir. One hundred percent authenticity. No

signs of infiltration or alteration." He, along with everyone else was wondering just what the report had said, for it to obviously affect the good doctor so much.

Finally the young man couldn't contain his curiosity, blurting out, "What is it sir? Can I help?"

"Can you help? Yesâ€|yes you can help; bring me everything you can find on Thomas Zacharia Bluestone. He's a security guard on the Merry Traveler; one of the freighters we hired to deliver raw materials to Jarum" Denton replied distantly, as though his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Why? What happened to him?" the eager aid asked.

"The local authorities have arrested him for raping an asari." A few audible gasps and sharp intakes of breath could be heard, as they more or less understood what that could mean. Aside from an obvious breach of integrity, Citadel laws more or less mirrored the UNSC/UEG's law when it came to rape. In fact it could be said that the UNSC/UEG had more strigent laws.

Looking back at the aide, who was staring at him, wide eyed and slacked jawed, he shouted, "Well what are you standing around for! Get moving!" The aide all but bolted as though struck by lightning, chattering into his earpiece in trying to obtain the necessary information.

As Denton watched the retreating aid, he turned back to the report, reading it in detail again. Apparently, the local authorities on the colony had arrested Thomas after someone had informed them of his triple act of stupidity.

First, he had raped an asari, and not only that, the asari in question had been a minor by her species standards. According the report forwarded to him, she was in, by human years, in her early eighties. For the asari, that was the biological/physical equivalent of a human teenage, being about thirteen years old, sixteen at best.

Compounding that stupidity was that the fact that either he, or someone else, had recorded the entire damn thing. From the moment, they were planning it after spotting the girl, to after they had committed the crime. The video itself had been attached, and by the slurring of Thomas' words, was clearly drunk and alone, based on how the camera was unsteady.

The video showed Bluestone's act in all its gruesome detail. From the way his victim had begged to be left alone, and later to simply be let go, to how the thug had gotten obviously turned on as he beat and violated a blue girl half his size. Ending with the image of the asari lying in a pool of her own tears in the cargo bay of the Merry Traveler, where Thomas had taken her.

In fact, the video was the reason that Thomas had almost instantly been caught. The security guard had tried to use the extranet to send the video to his friends, and had accidentally sent it to everyone in the local network. Including the victim's mother, who worked as a police officer on Jarum.

Less than an hour later, Thomas Bluestone had been arrested and literally thrown in jail. Landing in his cell with bruised ribs, a broken arm, and a black eye. Under most circumstances such obvious police brutality would bother Denton, but this time he found himself unmoved by the human's plight.

'God, she looks younger than my niece.' Denton thought as he looked at images of the victim. One from before the rape, taken at a recent birthday in fact, and one from after. In the first image, she appeared happy, surrounded by fellow asari, who like her were just starting to develop curves as they left childhood behind. In the second, taken after she had been rushed to the hospital, during her medical examine, she was tear stained and bruised, with a dead look in her eyes.

"Wait a second...how did we even get these hospital photos?" Denton asked the universe at large.

"It says that our agent on site, hacked into the hospital computers" his aide admitted.

Denton sighed as he thought 'you know, if I were on the Citadel Council I would probably think we were bad guys too. Sometimes I think Parangosky rejects any field agent who can't act like a bad movie villain.'

"What's the reaction like on Jarum?" Denton asked wearily.

"Small riots, minor fights and altercations breaking out across the colony, but most of the humans on the colony have either retreated into space or the UNSC/UEG compound." Was the answer. "Quite a few scraps have broken out, but nothing more major than some broken bones and a concussion or two. The colonial police and magistrate are actually doing their jobs and trying to maintain law and order. Already they've stopped at least two attempts to kill Mr. Bluestone."

Pinching his eyes, he asked, "What about Mr. Bluestone himself? Have the Citadel or Colonial authorities tried to contact us? I assume that this is only from our boots on the ground."

"Yes sir, they have. Local and Citadel authorities are saying that he will be prosecuted under their courts and laws." The aide didn't say anything else but the underlying threat was apparent. Either the UNSC/UEG lets it happen, or risk the consequences. "The local JAG is requesting orders on how to proceed sir."

Denton was sorely tempted to tell the man to do his job and figure it out himself (after all, Denton wasn't a lawyer), but he knew the man couldn't be expected to understand the geo-politics involved. It should have been a simple case of rape, but all the tensions between the Citadel Council and the UNSC made it more. If they tried to take over the case, the Citadel races would see it as humanity protecting their own, no matter the circumstances. And even if they convicted the man, any sentence would probably be seen as the humans being lenient.

And quite personally, seeing the evidence, Denton couldn't give a damn about this Mr. Bluestone. It was as though the man embodied some of the darker aspects of human nature to the point it sickened him.

And considering Denton worked with ONI the majority of his professional life, that was saying something. With the Great War, the morals of humanity when it came to their fellow humans, had skyrocketed. Showing respect and tolerance to each other on a never before seen scale. Crime within the colonies during the war, had dropped to near non-existent levels, as people were more focused on keeping the war effort alive than petty rivalries and now-forgotten feuds and hates. If they brought Thomas back into human space, the moment word of his crime got out, there would be lynch mobs and protestors within hours, if not minutes.

Nearby, listening intently was Serana Ke'dar, Denton's go to for when it came to diplomatic relations and suggestions regarding New Covenant. The female sangheili's head cocked to the side as she considered what she was hearing. Officially, she was no longer part of the UNSC proper, her contract of service having finished some time ago. Instead on loan to the UNSC by New Covenant at Denton's request. She had been tasked as Denton's go to person for when it came to advice or information when it came to dealing with the New Covenant. Partially because of what she was, and partially because of her service of the UNSC. Though it was rumored that the doctor had also done it for, less than professional reasons.

"Contact the JAG at the consulate and tell them...tell them...Tell them to provide full-cooperation with the local officials in the trial and prosecution. Give them everything they ask for. They want the ship, give them the ship. They want to hang him, they give them the rope. If they want to fucking crucify him, they hand them a damn cross!"

****APUFMKII****

On the far edge of New Covenant space, closer to Citadel territory than the UNSC, ONI listening station Davidson kept watch. Listening on both New Covenant and Citadel transmissions. The station itself was an old one, built shortly before First Contact at Shanxi, and right into a rather large asteroid. It was meant to keep tabs on any communiques between the two factions, and monitor any changes or potential alliances being made. Making it one of the most nerve wracking, and oxymoronically, easiest jobs in ONI.

The simple knowledge of being sandwiched between two potentially hostile factions was bad enough, but considering its distance from UNSC space only made it worse. Still, it wasn't as though anyone could find them. The finest sensor-jamming technology the UNSC could muster, along with reverse-engineered active camouflage technologies, made the base all but impossible to find. Which was a necessity since it was not purely a listening station. It was a small base, where ONI agents could rest, resupply and head out on missions to either territories.

Some of ONI's greatest raids against the New Covenant had been launched from Davidson. Including the ones that had all but devastated their few remaining shipyards, outside of their home systems. It was perhaps the most important facility in Admiral Parangosky's campaign to keep the New Covenant weak. With secrecy as its greatest weapon and protection.

Least, that was what the humans had assumed.

Beyond the station's sensor range, it was being watched. The station relied mostly on dead-drops and passive listening, along with tapping into communications lines to carry out their task. Active radar or sensors were usually off to reduce the risk of detection. A procedure that had carried on well, for a time. Should it ever be detected and found however, it was not without it's own defense. A HORNET nuclear minefield was laced throughout the asteroid belt and the space around it. The mines themselves always being rotated out to ensure that their stealth coatings were never compromised. Several of the larger asteroids were little more than automated gun batteries, along with the base itself, designed to shoot down Banshee fighters, Phantom and Spirit dropships, but nothing larger than a Lich. Complimenting all this was the three YSS-1000 Sabre fighters within the base proper. None of which, had seen any action since their deployment to the area. Even the Sabre's had been built from parts brought to the station.

On the bridge of his ship, Thel Vadam eyed the ONI base balefully. Knowing that even as his people had fought and died to assist the humans against the Citadel Council, this place had been in operation. A metaphorical knife repeatedly stabbed into the back of the New Covenant as they helped their human 'allies.'

The leader of the New Covenant turned to Admiral Rael'Zorah as he murmured, "This had better work." The quarian's fighter design, when what few engineers the Covenant still had took a look at them, were dumbstruck. Mainly at how it managed to be so advanced, yet so primitive at the same time. Massive redesigns had taken place, and the size of the fighter upscaled to the point it was almost double the original size, now just barely bigger than a Seraph fighter. The main reason all that space was needed was for the required systems to mount a plasma weapon, in this case, a Banshee's plasma guns and fuel rod cannon. All of this had taken almost all the time the Arbiter had given them, leaving barely enough time to build the fighters. A good portion of the plasma weapons systems had simply been inserted into the craft and design, and were not totally integrated into the design. There was a lot of room to make the craft more streamlined and efficient, but for now, this would be a good test to see if any level of combining the races of the two technology would actually work. All the actual work had taken place on the Arbiter's ship as he was not willing to risk any of his people's technology being stolen from him, a condition the quarians had accepted without protest.

All the systems seemed to be working well. But now came the moment of truth. Demonstrating whether or not the Quarian built fighter could stand up to what the humans had to use against them.

The Arbiter honestly wasn't sure. He knew using the Quarian fighters against Davidson was a gamble. But he was desperate, using his fleet to eliminate the base would change nothing, ONI would simply build a similar one somewhere else in his territory, he needed a game-changer, and he was hoping that that's what these fighters would be. Something that the humans would not be able to find a counter against, for a while at the very least.

After all the preparation and planning, one word set the irreversible events in motion.

"Begin." From the hangar's below his hooves, brand new fighters, seven in all, burst forth before banking in the general direction of

Davidson station. As they came closer, approaching the detection range of the mines, each ship was coated in a blue aura, their mass effect drive cores charging, dark energy working its magic.

Then, in an instant, the ships lurched forth, blazing past the mine field and right into the heart of the asteroid field in streaks of sapphire. The Sangheili veterans piloting them paused for a moment, paralyzed by how fast the ships had gone, before remembering their objective, and flying forth towards the ONI base. Launching fuel rod shots before cutting loose with their plasma cannons.

On the station itself, no one was even aware their perimeter had been breached. Filing reports, eating, talking to their colleagues, doing basic maintenance, and in general treating it as another boring day at an isolated military base. Completely oblivious to the danger.

At least until the first of the fuel rod shots made the station shudder, simultaneously silencing the station as a Sangheili pilot had been lucky enough to target the station's long range transmissions.

As the new fighters peeled off to avoid becoming a part of station by crashing into it, the station's defenses began to come online. But the fighters were literally moving too fast for the automated weapons systems to target them, humans had not even known that FTL in real-space was possible when these defenses were designed, so they were ill equipped to deal with it in combat. Just as the fighter's were about to be locked on, they engaged their drive cores once again, becoming nothing more than sapphire streaks, jumping into FTL and out of range. The defenses rotating madly, trying to find their targets or firing off into empty space.

The fighters soon turned and jumped back into FTL, back towards the station. Firing off their weapons, blowing great chunks of the station before jumping into FTL once more. Again and again they did this, hitting the station and blowing it apart then leaving before the fighters could be targeted.

The ONI personnel died without ever realizing how they were being attacked. Dying in confusion and fear like so many of their victims. Davidson coming apart in a fiery explosion as the fuel rods ignited the onboard munitions and sent the fusion reactor into a wildcat destabilization. The Sabre fighters on station never having a chance to even leave their hangars as the second run had seen the fuel rod cannon shots land directly in the hangar and blowing up the Sabres just as their pilots were boarding them.

Just as the seven fighters entered FTL one last time, the station and the asteroid it was built into, was engulfed into a massive fireball, fading out as quickly as it came, taking a good portion of the belt with it. The remote guns went dark as their broadcast power was cut off, and the minefield began to self detonate, no longer detecting any remaining UNSC presence.

"Victory...victory against ONI without any casualties on our side." the Arbiter stated proudly. His flagship advancing towards the location of the former base so that he could see it personally, if he so wished.

As Thel looked upon the remnants of the base that had represented

ONI's murderous treachery against their allies, he felt a deep satisfaction. Thinking that here was the key to victory, here was the key to a fresh start, and here was the key to the rebirth of a once great people.

'And perhaps more than one people' the Arbiter thought as he looked at Rael'Zorah, the only Quarian on the bridge of his flagship, but as far as Thel was concerned, the most important person, other than himself, there.

"Tell your people that the Quarians have more than proved their worth with these new ships...you and yours are welcome in our Covenant."

Had Rael been one to not care about dignity, he would have gotten on to his hands and knees and thanked him profusely. As it was, he nodded. "Many thanks, Lord Arbiter." He had heard others refer to the Arbiter as such prior. He did not realize that Thel was no longer paying attention to him, instead focused tightly on the gap that was once occupied by ONI.

Outside of the New Covenant ships, what was left of the ONI facility, and personnel, slowly cooled. Reaching the icy temperature of deep space as their killers congratulated themselves. But neither the living nor dead truly understood what had been started here. As the New Covenant began the first phase of striking back at the humans that had tormented them for years.

****APUFMKII****

Deep within UNSC/UEG territory, the events of the joint Quarian/Covenant fighter program had finally come to humanity's attention. On board the UNSC Point of No Return, the first and only meeting of all of ONI's highest commanders was taking place.

One man managed to express the feelings of the entire group, as he bluntly stated, "No warning no sign of what destroyed Davidson...what the fuck happened?" Enter newly anointed Vice Admiral Alex Halabi. The man had been part of ONI for a while, but only been brought into the 'Inner Circle' as it were recently, thus did not have the respect of his peers, but behaved like he did.

"It wasn't the New Covenant fleet...the station's sensors would have picked them up long before they could destroy Davidson" the vice-admiral nominally in charge of ONI's campaign against the New Covenant stated confidently. But his words didn't inspire much confidence, perhaps because Parangosky played such a direct role in leading the campaign that he had little to actually do most of the time, in fact, many in the room suspected that Parangosky had appointed the man to that position just to use him as a scapegoat when the campaign was inevitably brought to light, the head of ONI certainly had no respect or fondness for him.

"Who could have done this?" Admiral Parangosky demanded to know, having not even bothered to look at the vice-admiral as he spoke. "How could something come in and get so close to one of our listening stations without them knowing about it, let alone destroy the station before it could send word?" ONI had only recently learned of the station's destruction when they had failed to report in on schedule and a Prowler had been sent in to investigate. Only to find the

station itself completely absent.

"The Citadel might have been able to." Captain Gibson replied. The man was in charge of most, if not all, of ONI's wetwork operations. Aside from being Parangosky's closest ally, he had also been studying Citadel technology in detail, along with the tactics used during the few skirmishes the UNSC had had with them. "The methods used fit their modus operandi: jumping in, hitting hard, and then jumping out before we can try and get a lock on them."

"Warships belonging to the Council Races could have arrived at the edge of the system just outside of Davidson's sensor range and then made a short FTL jump to attack the base at point blank range, destroying Davidson before it could defend itself or even send out a distress signal...Of course all this is assuming that there's a Mass Relay in the area that we don't know about." he continued in distant tones. "What doesn't make sense is how fast they took out Davidson station. They used antimatter bombs and hyper-accelerated slugs, but standard containment protocols should have ensured against a wildcat destabilization of the reactor."

"And if there isn't a Mass Relay nearby?" Osmin asked.

"Then...I don't know" Gibson admitted.

"I think were all ignoring the obvious possibility." Ambassador Alan Morgan Denton, who had been summoned away from urgent business on Earth to attend this meeting, and now found everyone seemingly ignoring him, said loudly.

"And what is that?" Ackerson replied snidely.

"That we've finally provoked the New Covenant to the point where their striking back and the reason that we don't know what destroyed Davidson is that they developed something new" Denton answered coldly. Denton, as much as he wanted not to be, was still a part of ONI, Section III. Unlike his peer Halsey, who had somehow managed to separate herself from ONI, or at least Section III, and refused to reveal how she had done so. When ONI came knocking, this was one time he couldn't simply shut the door in its face.

"Something new...bah...the Elites have no imagination or subtly that's why we won the Great War" Halabi blurted out contemptuously.

Denton snorted, "Then you are a greater idiot than I could have ever expected." Halabi sneered at the professor, but held back the urge to try something. Not that it would have done much good anyways, seeing as he wasn't really here. Instead it was a new form of communication. Something Denton called, 'Quantum Entanglement Communication'. It was still being prototyped, but it had been reverse-engineered from the Forerunner archives, and was apparently, impossible to trace or wiretap. "I'll assume you don't know the details so I'll explain. We didn't win the war. In fact, humanity was lucky to have survived the war. That only happened because of a quintillion to one chance that our race was chosen as inheritors of the galaxy by the Forerunners, and the odds increase only more that the Old Covenant was torn apart by civil war from the revelation. If that truth had never been told, humanity would be extinct, or at best, surviving on an INF."

Most of those present nodded at the truth of Denton's words. Unlike the general public, which had been fed propaganda about humanity's 'glorious victory' over the Covenant, those who had actually led operations during the Great War knew that humanity had simply won by default. That the Spartans and all other wonder weapons, unconventional tactics, and acts of heroism humanity had deployed against the enemy had never been enough. But a few of the younger people present seemed troubled by his words. Having soaked up pro-UNSC/anti-Covenant propaganda as children, and coming of age in an era where humanity's fortunes only seemed to rise.

But there was something about Admiral Parangosky's reaction that troubled the doctor. A dark expression that ever so briefly crossed her face at the mention of human weakness during the Great War. However, Denton decided that it wasn't immediately relevant, so he continued with his line of thought.

"But still, the Covenant aren't capable of something like, technologically at least. We know what to look for now, when it comes to their stealth technology. Not to mention that we know just what to look out for when it comes to their infiltration tactics." Denton continued, "And far as we've known, they've yet to apply active camouflage to any of their ships, like we have to some of our Prowlers." He activated his omnitool and brought up the sensor data recovered from the site. "From the data collected, it is obvious the station's fusion reactor went rampant and vaporized almost everything in a forty kilometer diameter sphere. Engulfing the station, the asteroid and some of the space around it. Based on lack of Sabre debris, they were most likely caught in the blast. But here's the kicker, they may never have left the station, due to lack of any debris. Whoever did this, hit fast enough and hard enough, that the never had a chance to fight back."

An uneasy silence permeated the room. Ever since the Great War, like so much else, the UNSC had done all that they could to ensure that they would never be caught off guard again. The very suggestion that a race had a means of silently infiltrating then destroying a UNSC asset, even if it was only a listening station, was unsettlingly to say the least. They had been working on counter-measures to the Citadel Council's real-space FTL drives, and their combat applications, but had yet to find one outside of the new Babylons, increasing the number of auto-cannons on ODPs and ships and new tactics.

"Any suggestions as to how this would be possibly then, Alan?"

"Just two, and both of them seem ridiculous, even to me." He paused, the others waiting for him to continue, till least one of them lost his patience.

"Well? Out with it then!"

"Don't get your tits in a twist Hal, I'll tell you. Either the New Covenant and the Citadel Council are working with each other, unlikely as neither of them are willing to trade anything regarding space-faring tech, or the Covies got their hands on Citadel tech and reverse engineered some.

Ambassador Denton's words hit the room like a bomb, stunning everyone into silence. Ever since the encountering the Citadel species the

ultimate nightmare scenario of humanity's military strategists had been fighting the New Covenant allied to the Citadel Council. With access to the vast resources of the Council Races the New Covenant's military and economy could get back on its feet. Moreover, armed with the old Covenant races mastery of Slipspace technology, the vast fleets of the Council Races could attack Earth and the other centers of human power directly.

Then after gathering her thoughts, the head of ONI addressed everyone present.

"We need to see if there's any truth to Denton's theory...have all our assets search for any links between the Citadel races and the New Covenant...we also need to do everything we can poison relations between the two powers and improve their relations to us."

"A good way to do that would be to cancel Operation Spartacus...it can only hurt relations between humanity and the Council Races when they realize what were doing" Denton added.

But as usual, there was no compromise in Parangosky, who bluntly told him "we have invested too much into the Operation to cancel it nowâ€|besides its too late...the next wave of reinforcements and supplies have already been sent and Spartacus is just entering its next more public phase."

Ambassador Denton simply sighed in response. The truth was he had expected an answer like that. Knowing what kind of woman Parangosky was. But he also knew that the fallout from Operation Spartacus was liable to be much bigger and nastier than virtually anyone involved suspected. And as usual, it would be up to him to clean it up.

'I wonder how hard the krogan Councilor will punch me if I tell him were taking the whole Hegemony away from the Citadel?' Denton asked himself. Hoping that he wouldn't have to deliver that particular message personally.

****APUFMKII****

"Long has it been, since we have taken newcomers into our fold! Into the guiding arms of our Covenant!" A sangheili garbed in religious robes voiced from his podium, temporarily erected in the Council Chamber, his robes marking him as a Prophet. The bleachers filled by the Covenant Council, minor political leaders and the like. "What we once thought to be the beginning of the end of our Covenant, has proven to be our salvation!" The Sangheili continued, he was flanked by the Arbiter and several other higher ranking members of the Council, while up and down the Chamber floor, beneath the bleachers, two rows of red armored Honor Guards, armed with energy staves.

Outside, on projections and screens outside the Council chambers, and scattered across all of High Charity and the territories of the New Covenant, citizens from all walks of life watched. Listening intently and assessing the quarians from what they could see.

Before them were the four quarian Admirals and their families, standing, to most eyes at least, proud and tall. Whilst in reality, they were just overcoming the shock and awe they had felt upon seeing the New Covenant Capital: High Charity. Along with as many of their

population that could fit within the Council chamber on the floor below. A paltry number, but they had been told that the effort would make all the difference. Just in case however, many were also standing amongst the crowd, outside the chamber.

When the admirals had first asked, just how they were going to bring the quarians and the Migrant Fleet to the Covenant, the Arbiter had simply replied: "They will come to us." And it did. For centuries, the quarian people had thought that the Citadel Station made by the Protheans, was the greatest artificial construct of all time. High Charity quickly destroyed that notion. It was over ten times the size of the Prothean construct, and there was also one great big difference between the two: High Charity was mobile.

When it had arrived, hundreds if not thousands of Covenant warships ripped their way into real space, preceding the sudden arrival of the station itself. But the shock hadn't ended their. Upon entering the station, they nearly fainted at the massive city within. Levels upon levels, there were even portions dedicated totally to botanical gardens and livestock. Something that would never happen on the Citadel.

They were brought back as they heard the last few lines of the Prophet's speech. "Let us recite the words that forged our Holy Covenant, to commemorate this event!" The quarians present also readied themselves. Before this initiation into the Covenant, Thel had told the Admirals of how this invitation would go, and if they were to join in this recital, it would make their acceptance go that much easier.

As one voice, they all spoke:

"_So full of hate were our eyes_
That none of us could see
Our war would yield countless dead
But never victory
So let us cast arms aside
And like discard our wrath
Thou, in faith, will keep us safe
Whilst we find the path."

Thel repressed a smirk, the quarians had recited the lines with perfection. No hesitation, no incorrection, it was as though they had been part of the Covenant for millennia. It had obviously surprised several of the Councilors, and many of those of present. The Prophet however simply smiled in joy and pride as he continued, "By our Faith, we looked back into our past, to try and find that which would save us from degradation. A faith that was weakened and nearly broken by the Great Revelation, and the Betrayal of the Heretics! But still we believed that the Gods would aid us, and so they have!" With a grand gesture, he motioned to the quarians, "These are those that would join us! Though they appear frail and weak, they are far stronger than many others! What would have shattered and broken our

Holy Covenant, they have not only experienced, but endured." The Prophet paused, gesturing to one of the Admirals to come forward.

With little hesitation, Rael stepped forward, moving to behind the podium. "My people, we are the quarians, for centuries, we have lived without a world to call our own. Shunned and oppressed by those we once thought to be our allies. Cast out like vermin to die in the cold void of space. But we did not. We endured. We did not give our betrayers any glory by succumbing. We refused to lay down and die! Scraps and refuse was our resource, time and ingenuity our savior, and now we have found, our salvation!" Thel felt a massive hand on his shoulder, looking behind him, the Prophet gave his race's version of a smile and nodded. A sign for Rael to step down.

"You have heard their words, you have seen their plight. Are there any among you that would deny those them our salvation?" A resounding "No!" was the answer. "Then let us mark this day, as the Homecoming of the Machinists! And the Start of the Tenth age of Reconciliation!"

Again the crowd cheered, shouting again as one voice, "The Third! Humility and Brotherhood!"

As the cheers filled the air, the quarians, for the first time that many could recall, felt proud and held their heads up high once again. For what seemed like forever, they had been regarded as thieves, outcasts, and exiles by virtually all who knew them. Treated with a mixture loathing, pity, and contempt by almost everyone they encountered. But now perhaps the most powerful leaders they had ever met in history were calling them a literal gift from the gods. It was a shocking yet pleasant change of pace to say the least.

However, good it this was for the Quarians and the New Covenant as a whole, their enemies would be shocked and dismayed to learn of this development. For both factions, their enemies had prayed, and in the case of some, actively sought for their ends. Instead, they had brought together the two factions who were in the most desperate need of what the other offered. Accidentally creating an alliance that would rock the galactic balance of power to its core.

"_The sum, is more often than not, greater than its individual parts."_

Unknown

A/N: (Follower38):

Right then, I assume that those of you reading this have issues with some of the events in the chapter or are simply curious. I will do the best that I can to answer them. First off, the Citadel Council's projections, they are based off the knowledge from several years ago, and almost everything is speculation are worse, an educated guess at best. The slipspace jamming tech obviously will not affect human slipspace drives, nor will it affect Covenant slipspace drives.

Af for the events of the Rebellion, its going to show both the worst and the best of how this operation can and will go. More active human involvement will be happening here. As for the Bluestone debacle, simple human arrogance, stupidity and general scumbag behavior.

Denton is going to basically bend over for this because this is something that Denton can't allow to negatively affect the UNSC, as he is doing his best to foster better relations at almost any cost.

As for the quarian/Covenant tech, it's the best result type deal. Quite honestly, we probably accelerated/stretched it to near unbelievable levels but it's a necessity for the story. And it's not exactly perfect. More on it will be expanded upon in the next chapter. As for the scene where the quarian's joined the Covenant, there is absolutely nothing anywhere, either canon or fanfiction on how new races are inducted, so obviously I took several liberties.

If any of you still have any issues, please state in a review and I will either try to explain why that is, or like some of you can attest to, thank you for pointing out the error.

Speaking of reviews, I request that any of you willing, be more detailed. What did you like, what you did, what you would like to maybe see, etc etc. And no, this is not "Don't give review details and I won't write" type of deal. I don't do that. I'll keep writing, and posting, as fast as I and my co-writer can manage. This is just a small favor I'm asking for.

19. Fragile Peace: Proxies and Revelations

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk. II

Co-written with aDarkOne

all remaining grammatical errors are mine. If anyone wants to beta/grammar check. PM me. If you have anyone that can vouch for you, even better, but vouches are not mandatory.

Chapter 19

"The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea."

-Mao Zedong

Fragile Peace: Proxies and Revelations

UNSC Point of No Return

The use of the Odin's Eye, on the UNSC Point of No Return, was reserved for meetings of the utmost secrecy. Barring a scant few events, every single secret that could spell the end or significant danger to humanity had been discussed in the Cage, as some called it, since it's completion. Yet the regularity that it was being used was quickly becoming unprecedented. Not even the during the Great War and Heretic wars did the Eye see this much use.

And all of those in the room knew it. Again, those present during the last meeting were here once again, with one obvious absence: Denton. No one said a word about it as if he were not here, then there was a reason for it.

Sitting at the head of the table was the ONI Section III director. Not bothering with theatrics, she simply nodded. A signal to them to pick up the hardcopy packets before them and to begin reading them. Muttered curses, sharp intakes of breath and controlled exhales could be heard in the otherwise dead silent room as each read through the files.

Pargonsky steepled her hands together. "As you've read, we have lost two more stations within New Covenant space. And again, we did not know of either's destruction until Prowlers were sent to recon the area. However," She paused, tapping on the table's inbuilt display, before inserting a data disk into one of the nearby slots. "This time we are not totally in the dark. One of the station's AIs manage to eject its black boxes. We recovered one." The holoemitter activated and began to play.

They were shown an image of deep space, seemingly empty and peaceful. Then the image abruptly cut off and was replaced by static. Parangosky's captive audience looking on in confusion as they beheld apparently nothing.

"Computer...replay recording D72 but at 1% speed" the admiral commanded.

This time they could all see the blurry image of a spacecraft enter the scene. Stopping at the edge of visual range just long enough to fire a glowing green blob towards the camera. Then the visual feed suddenly cut off.

"Was that...a fighter?" Ackerson muttered in disbelief. His reaction was shared, if more muted, by the others.

"Yes...it took our analysts and AIs hours to clean up and make sense of the data but it appears that fighters equipped with eezo engines and Covenant energy weapons took out our bases." Parangosky admitted in neutral tones. "Just as Denton predicted."

"And those two bases were nowhere near any known Mass Relays." Osmin added, the feed being joined by a star map, tagged with the locations of all known Mass Relays; both active and inactive. "Everything points to the New Covenant having built those fighters."

Rear Admiral Ned Rich rubbed his eyes, "Meaning...either the covies had since started playing nice with the Council and been getting cozy with each other while we tore up their backyards...OR the Covies got their hands on the tech and figured out how it works. And quite frankly, I don't know which one is going to keep me up at night more." Murmurs of assent could be heard. One louder than most.

"Yes, perhaps. But I think we are all ignoring another possibility." Alex Halabi said, getting everyone's attention. "Ever since our last meeting, Dr. Denton's words made me reassess my views. And I grudgingly have to admit he was right." That was not a surprise; you didn't become a flag officer by being a hard headed idiot when your argument is torn to pieces with logic. "But back to the topic at hand, I think we are ignoring one glaring possibility: someone outside the Council is assisting the Covenant."

Ned snorted, "What, you mean mercenaries or something?"

"No...scientists or at least engineers from the Citadel species. I think we have to admit that we've been guilty of hubris here. We assumed that we could easily master Mass Effect technology because of our AIs and generally higher tech base, but its a completely different type of FTL from anything we encountered before. Of course we're going to have issues with it early on. I think the Arbiter or someone else in his government was able to rein in his pride the way that we should have been able to and recruit some aliens who were already experts in the field." Halabi continued. "That would be the best case scenario. Worst case, an entire species or government is working with, or I dread to consider, for, the Covenant now."

No one spoke for a moment as each considered the ramifications and potential consequences of such an alliance. Whether it be by individuals or a group. Finally someone asked, "Then what are our options?"

"Unfortunately, it's too late to deny the Covenant this technology as apparently; they already have obtained it. So we will have to follow their example and ensure we acquire it also." Admiral Parangosky explained. She briefly recalled the failed demonstration some time back, regarding the UNSC's first attempt at Mass Effect drives. She made a mental note to learn what had happened to the presumably scrapped project.

"And what about our operations?" Halabi asked, "I may be in charge of our operations in New Covenant space, but I do not see how we will be able to continue them. If they are aware of our outposts, and can now apparently destroy them with impunity, we risk both men and material for potentially little gain."

"So what, you want to abandon everything we have in the Covie's backyard?" Osmin sneered at the Vice admiral, who barely managed to avoid flinching. "Well sorry to tell you-"

"Enough." Paragnosky said, shutting up the ONI captain. The older woman gave the younger a pointed look that promised 'we will speak of this later'. "Halabi is correct. You have permission to pull back and end all operations in New Covenant space for now. Until we learn of a countermeasure against these new fighters, like Alex said, the gains do not outweigh the risks."

"Its only a matter of time until somebody gives the Citadel Races Slipspace technology or they figure it out on their own and now the New Covenant has Mass Effect technology, if we don't gain the ability to use FTL in real-space too we will fall behind." Ackerson boldly stated. "And until those damn Guardian's open up the Archives, we're going to fall behind the moment they do. We all remember what it was like to not be top dog in a big galaxy."

The ONI Director nodded her assent. "Until then. For now, our main goal will be to recruit existing experts on the Citadel's form of FTL, aliens that we can bribe, intimidate, and/or convert. If we have to ally ourselves with the discarded and pariahs of their society, or warm their beds as though lovers, so be it, whatever it takes to increase our technological base at our enemy's expense."

Seeing the dismissal for what it was, all but Parangosky and Osmin rose and left the Eye. Each heading towards their respective ships

docked to or in the Point of No Return. As the last of them left, Osmin turned to her mentor. "I apologize, mother."

The older woman waved her off, letting go of her stoic facade. "It's alright Serin. You simply were doing as I taught you." She sighed, relaxing into her chair. "In all my years, I have regretted nothing I have done, in the name of humanity's safety and survival. Through my actions and decisions, we have made ourselves strong and our enemies weaker. But now...our enemies have grown legion, our allies are non-existent, and now we are inviting snakes into the garden...My only regret is that we are forced into this situation...And that I will be the one informing Lord Hood of this."

****APUFMKII****

Given the gravity of the situation ambassador Denton had decided to go to Jarum to handle the Bluestone crisis personally. Having requisitioned a corvette from the UNSC, both for himself and a few others, they had arrived here in virtually no time at all. Now he was within reach of the UNSC consulate in the capital city of New Ozai, heading down to the planet via a Pelican dropship.

The dropship jarred and shook as it made it's into the atmosphere. Denton himself was almost napping, the shaking of the drop ship a regular experience for him. And the same could be said for the two marines going planetside with him. Both from the elite ODS division, their helmets on the racks above them, the bored looks on their faces were plain to see. The same could not be said of Denton's aids, who were holding onto the crash harnesses for dear life. Thankfully for the latter, it wasn't long before the shaking stopped and they were lowering down onto the landing pad.

Before they exited the vehicle, the sergeant in charge of his security detail told the ambassador. "Sir, before we touch down, we need to brief and your entourage about the situation planetside."

Denton considered waving ODS off, but considering the severity of the situation, he didn't. "Yes, go on."

"We've got protests and a few riots ever since the news about Mr. Bluestone got out to the public. Nothing major so far, but we've had to order the evacuation of all non-UNSC personnel, the rest are now holed up in the Consulate. The civies outside the consulate though, are still present. We haven't broadcasted a general evacuation order. We've had some attacks, IEDs, homemade incendiaries and some shots fired, but no major injuries. Local LEOs are assisting in keeping the local populace under the control, but we've had to station the M12's with LAAGs outside to deter any more...extreme behavior."

Denton grimaced, technically the UNSC wasn't even supposed to have any military hardware above the infantry level on any Citadel world. Like a lot of rules though, that had been ignored on Jarum because the locals were benefiting from the human presence so much. But in the current environment he doubted the local authorities would be so forgiving.

"Just don't...shoot anyone if you can avoid it." Denton replied wearily.

"Don't worry sir. Even if they did breach the compound, all weapons outside the compound are loaded with TTRs; someone figured out how to make them work with what the locals wear."

Denton let out a sigh of relief. TTRs, or Tactical Training Rounds, were essentially paintballs that could effectively emulate a real bullet's speed and trajectory. Unlike a real bullet however, TTRs detonated once within three centimeters of a target, spraying it with red paint that would then lock up the user's clothes wherever it hit and numb the affected area. In the case of multiple shots to the center mass, the entire body would lock up.

The pelican jolted one last time as it touched down. The ODSs and Denton removed their harnesses with practiced ease, the other civilians fumbling with theirs. Before anyone could even think of moving for the door control, the sergeant stuck their arm out. "Weapons and armor for all of you. Standard protocol for all UNSC personnel until we can get things sorted out." The trooper paused when they saw Serana. "Him included." The sergeant started tossing out basic body armor and M6-C magnums before anyone could correct him. It took the better part of fifteen minutes for everyone to armor up, the human body armor looking strange on Serana's body.

The trip to the consulate was fast and confusing to Denton. He got glimpses of angry crowds, heard shouted insults, and then he was inside. Protected and essentially manhandled by his security detail and assistants until he was in the UNSC building, standing in front of him most of time, as though they were shielding him with their bodies. At the same time, giving everyone else a clear view of themselves.

Once inside, it seemed like any other minor diplomatic office Denton had been to. Full of bright colors, generic artwork, and bureaucratic personnel with insincere smiles. Although the smiles seemed more forced than normal, the ambassador was able to almost immediately sense the tension in the air, knowing that recent events had put everybody on edge. Another detail adding to that was the fact that everyone was armed; carrying either some M6 variant or in a few rare cases, an M7 "bullet hose" SMG.

As they were walking, they were joined by the consul, a tall handsome man who greeted Denton with a firm handshake. Consul Alexander Xanatos had been assigned to Jarum since it had been designated the dropoff point for UNSC reparations to the Hierarchy. Establishing ties with numerous political and business groups on the colony, and to a lesser extent, throughout Citadel space. He was friends with the governor, on a first name basis with all the major figures in the colony, and according to rumor had an asari girlfriend. The latter a sign that Xanatos was part of the generation born after the wars, and thus not as poisoned by the xenophobia as many were. Therefore Xanatos was the perfect person to give Denton insight into the situation on Jarum and its political ramifications.

"Welcome to Jarum doctor, sorry it couldn't be under more hospitable conditions."

Denton shook his head. "Don't worry, I'm used to being in more hazardous situations. Have you been working with the local LEOs as ordered?"

"Yes sir. We've locked down Bluestone's ship and his associates, and have allowed the LEOs to both search the ship and interrogate the others, under our watch. So far, the only things they've found have been further evidence against Bluestone and nothing to say his associates had anything to do with it. If anything, they have separated themselves from him and been very cooperative."

"What about the locals themselves? The sarge informed me of the general situation, but how is it really? I need details."

Xanatos rubbed the back of his neck. "As much I would like to help you there sir, I'm afraid I can only give you generalities. The people are, in a word, pissed. But thankfully the majority know who to blame." Gesturing in the general direction of the main entrance he explained, "Most of the people outside are just there to make sure that we don't try to extradite Bluestone to human space where 'he'll be allowed to roam free'. But there are still a considerable number of people who are using this as an opportunity to attack us. The majority of the local populace is at the precinct, try to enact some vigilante justice."

Denton sighed, "Is there anyone who can give me a more detailed knowledge of the locals here."

"Actually there are, sir."

"Are," Denton raised an eyebrow. "As in more than one?"

"Yes sir. Some of the troopers, have actually become acquainted with the locals."

"If the rumors are true, so have you, Xanatos."

Actually eliciting a momentary flush before it faded just as quickly. "Yes well," The consul coughed, "That is neither here nor there sir. And of not much help to us." They finally stopped in front a set of modest doors. "I assumed that you would want to get a better grasp of the local situation, so I gathered those who could best assist me already, sir." The doors opened to reveal a modest meeting room and several familiar faces.

Denton gave a small smile, "Well now, isn't this a pleasant surprise?"

****APUFMKII****

Unfortunately, not everyone saw the Bluestone crisis on Jarum as a bad thing. There were groups that viewed situation as an opportunity. And the leadership of the foremost group was currently meeting to discuss their options.

"We should release our promotional video now. Thanks to that savage Bluestone the public has never been more receptive to our message." Abrudas Acton confidently told the rest of the governing board for the Sons of Impera.

"Unfortunately we don't have the funds to show the video everywhere." Treasurer Treeya Nyxeris admitted. "Whether it be on a scraped up budget, or even freelance, the costs are too far beyond us. Especially with all the expenditures recently."

"Besides, even if we could afford to have it shown everywhere people would be all too likely to dismiss it as just another paid advertisement." Kreia said doubtfully. "The humans have been doing too well to change their image since Impera, especially thanks to that human ambassador of theirs."

Abrudas had to concede that point, Denton, the public face of humanity, had been making strides in trying to foster better human/Citadel relations. Not to say that many were willing to embrace the humans with open arms. But thanks to Denton's efforts, the people were at least willing to listen. "I've already thought of that, which is why we 'leak' it to the extranet and then tell everyone not to watch it" Acton replied deviously.

"Come again? How would that work in our favor? To tell the people now to watch what we desire them to see and learn of?" Kreia asked.

"Once you make something taboo that simply makes it more attractive to many people. We will release a public statement telling everyone that the video is too raw, graphic, not safe for children; that sort of thing. Then people will deliberately seek it out to see what all the fuss is about." the head of Public Relations explained.

"That's devious...I love it" chairman Pallin Jared said enthusiastically.

On the outside, the chairman was pleased. Showing complete approval for the rest of the board. Inside though, he was disappointed that they were still being so timid.

Jared knew that if the humans were able to appear as though they respected law and order and dealt harshly with rapists, even rapists who preyed on non-humans, they would come out ahead in the long run. After all, the Citadel Races had their own share of like criminals. Which the human officials on Jarum appeared to be doing. Content to let the colonial authorities try and convict Bluestone, and even full cooperating with the investigation. Fostering the 'false' impression that humans were relatively decent, law abiding, and compassionate.

'The board can't see past tomorrow...I will have to handle this myself' Jared thought as he began to covertly compose a message on his omni-tool. Sending it to one of his personal assets on Jarum.

****APUFMKII****

Back when they first started, the daily security briefings had been an unpleasant change to the Citadel Council. But by now the Councilors were used to it. Using their fortified position in the Citadel Tower to plan for what was once unthinkable.

"I don't think its worth starting a war over Bluestone, Cicero. The humans appear to be cooperating fully with the investigation." Councilor Tevos told her turian colleague.

"I am NOT suggesting that Tevos, but if the hairy mammals refuse to offer real cooperation, which I suspect is what will happen, then we

MUST respond to this blatant assault on one of our people." Cicero replied pompously.

"Sure, Cicero." Aethyta said with an eye roll. Both Tevos and Aethyta were unified for once. Both angered by the fact that the turian seemed more interested in using one of their own children to score political points against the humans, than in actual justice. But even Aethyta was too prudent to say it aloud. "The fact that they just handed him over, and didn't even protest, means they are really working against us." Wrex snorted at that.

"The matriarchs make an excellent point. For the moment at least the humans are working with us to defuse the situation on Jarum. As long as that remains the case I believe no action is needed on that front." the salarian Councilor said reasonably. "Nor any reason to think there are any ulterior motives."

"Speaking of reasonable; have any of you seen the Sons of Impera video?" Saren asked the Councilors and their advisors. All of them answered in the negative, citing a number of reasons from having never heard of the video, or considering to have not been worth their attention. "Well I have, and it is rather, disturbing." Those words snared their attention. Having once been a Council Spectre, Saren had been witness to some of the most heinous acts thought possible. For it to actually affect him, spoke magnitudes.

"Well let's see what all the fuss's about." Councilor Wrex said after a moment.

It took Saren a few seconds to call up the video on the holo-screen in the middle of the room. Then the Councilors and their advisors stood silently as they watched the Sons propaganda film. Watching the Citadel burn as human forces stormed it. Ending with the image of a Spartan ruthlessly gunning down a little asari girl.

"Do those fools WANT to start a war?" Wrex muttered once the video ended, the others murmuring other similar words. "Either this will piss the humans off enough that they'll decide they need to become what we think they are, or people will start clubbing every human they can reach."

"Yes, especially if video is believed to be real fact, rather than simple fiction and hypothetical situation." Mordin supplemented.

"Yes, well. Those were my thoughts exactly. I've issued a gag order to ensure that this vid does not go beyond the Citadel." Saren continued. "It's too easy, like the good doctor said, for someone to manipulate this and make it seem as though it were real. I can only imagine the chaos it would cause if this was reported as legitimate news." Though they would later deny, a collective shudder passed through most of them.

The masses were too easily manipulated, believing in what they were shown and told, if someone or something with enough of a reputation told them. Sometimes it seemed that the more outrageous a lie, the more likely the people were to believe it.

"Too late for containment: the video has most likely already spread throughout the extranet." Mordin said sadly.

"And so far, no naive idiot who believes everything he reads on the extranet without doing some fact checking and connections, seems to have gotten ahold of it." Okeer added. "If someone of worth actually got their hands on this and believed it, we'd had heard of something by now."

"Speaking of something," Valern interrupted, "There's been something strange going on in the Hegemony. The STG has been reporting unusually high levels of both activity and chatter within the batarian regime. On both public, private, and military channels. They've been pulling back more and more of their forces, and incoming traffic has almost tripled in the past several months."

"Sounds like they've lost their quad for some reason" Wrex added.

"That's not too far off the mark. Whatever is going on back there, it's got the upper echelons spooked. Military included." Valern replied. "Whatever is going on, their Department of Information Control has made it their main priority. We're getting more uncensored broadcasts in the past several months than in the last several years. So far, their Department is keeping it inside, but I do not think it will last."

"What exactly IS going on in the Hegemony?" Aethyta asked.

"This is merely a preliminary analysis but it appears to be a...slave revolt" Vald'n continued quietly.

Wrex laughed aloud, shocking everybody else present. Still chuckling as he said vindictively, "Well its certainly been a long time coming for those little bastards."

Although nobody else actually laughed about it, they all shared the sentiment. The Batarian Hegemony had been openly breaking Citadel law for centuries. Justifying their slavery and other barbaric practices as part of their culture. Usually staying just on the edge of provoking a response from the Citadel Council.

But the salarian Councilor was oddly silent at Wrex's statement. Even Cicero could tell that he was holding something back. Saying to Vald'n, "What else is going on? What aren't you telling us?"

He hesitated for a moment before answering: "There are rumors of human involvement" Vald'n admitted.

"WHAT!" Cicero screamed, every fiber of his being testifying to his outrage. "Are you telling me, that the humans are actively trying to destabilizing the Batarian Hegemony, one of the Associate races of the Citadel Council!?"

"Possibly. Right now though, the rumors only speak of humans being part of the revolt" Valern elaborated. "Though nothing says if these humans are acting independently, or as part of a larger group or entity."

"What else could it be but the UNSC? This is just a prelude to a declaration of war by them" Cicero thundered.

"And you're overreacting." Aethyta retorted. "The Hegemony has been drunk on power for centuries. They don't know where to stop and balk at the thought of a new arrival being superior to them in any way. Trying to enslave members of a species who survived their own attempted genocide, plus how many centuries of inner conflict, is just asking for trouble."

"Of course, if any real evidence of human involvement turns up; we will, indeed, take action." Tevos says diplomatically.

Cicero mentally processes the words and his whole demeanor changes. Turning to Tevos as he says "Do I have your word on that?"

The asari Councilor looked to her advisor for a moment, who only gave a shrug in response. Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Tevos answered, "Yes, you do."

"And of course the Krogan Empire will take action if the humans are involved" Wrex says. The battlemaster frankly despised the Hegemony. Thinking that the Council should have dealt with the slavers a long time ago. If it had been up to him, he would have had their planets razed to ground before bringing them back up again. But compared to the genocidal humans, he actually considered the batarians as allies. The more familiar of two evils as it were.

Then everybody looked at Vald'n. The salarian Councilor being the only one who had failed to voice support for taking action against the humans if they were really trying to destabilize the Hegemony. With the rest of the Council united, Vald'n felt he had no choice.

Saying simply "the Salarian Union will also support the Hegemony if the UNSC is indeed trying to undermine it."

As they each gave their promise to aid the Hegemony if the UNSC was behind the revolt, Cicero's grin grew even wider. Now all he had to do was to prove it, and then crush the UNSC's operation just as it began, not realizing in his moment of supposed triumph how far it had already gone.

****APUFMK****

Back on Jarum, events were already in motion. Ones that could have an impact beyond the colony itself. As the chairman of the Sons of Impera met with one of the organization's most aggressive members. A woman that he had personally recruited.

Jarum had once been a sleepy little colony on the edge of Turian Hierarchy territory, with New Ozai its only real city. But now New Ozai had a bustling spaceport, with many people from UNSC and Citadel territory coming in and out all the time. New buildings were everywhere with more under construction. New Ozai was well on its way to becoming a major port city, its unique environment attracting businessmen, artists, entrepreneurs, and hustlers of all kinds.

One of the signs of how New Ozai had changed over the last three years was Kira Park, a public park in the center of the city. Finished less than a year ago, Kira Park was a large cultivated area full of playgrounds for children, which was frequented by people with young children living in the city.

Chairman Pallin Jared hated Kira Park and everything else about the 'new' Jarum. He was disgusted that so many of his own people were welcoming and working with the humans merely for the sake of profit. Considering it one (if that) step away from outright treason.

Nevertheless Kira Park served as a good location for him to meet with the head of the local branch of the Sons on Jarum. An asari who hated the humans perhaps even more than he did. "Speak of the monster, and here they will come." He whispered as he spotted his quarry.

Enter Jona Sederis. Founder and leader of the newly reformed Eclipse private security firm, with a hatred of humanity rivaled by few. During the short UNSC/Citadel war a human warship had destroyed Eclipse's main base, killing everyone inside, including Jona's own sister (the only family she had left at that point). To add insult to injury, the UNSC had not even meant to harm Eclipse, the crew of the warship had simply seen what appeared to be a military base in turian space and assumed it belonged to the Hierarchy.

Those were hardly the only losses Eclipse suffered during the conflict either.

The security firm had had numerous contracts with people living in territory that the humans had attacked. Virtually every time that happened Eclipse forces had tried to retaliate, which had always resulted in them getting slaughtered thanks to the enemy's massively superior firepower.

At the end of the war Jona Sederis had been left with no family, virtually no resources, and just a handful of able bodied warriors. So she had decided to start over on Jarum, figuring people who had to deal with humans on a regular basis would want and need protection from the 'vicious' mammals, and that it was only a matter of time until the humans attacked again. Assuming that Jarum would be ground zero for any new UNSC/Citadel war, and wanting to be close enough to do serious damage once the war started.

At first Jona and her views had been very welcome on Jarum. Everybody seemed to agree that the humans were dangerous and nasty and shouldn't be around decent folk. But as time went by and reparations from as well as trade with the humans made the colony rich, the colonists had gotten used to the human presence. Seeing them as a boon rather than a threat or liability. Whereas Jona and those like her were increasingly seen as troublemakers, hatemongers, and oddballs (at least on Jarum).

However, the Bluestone crisis had changed everything. Now a lot of the colonists were saying that those like Jona might have a point. Something the chairman and Sederis planned to capitalize on.

"The Bluestone situation is the perfect opportunity to show the rest of the galaxy what humanity is REALLY like but only if we handle it the right way" Jared said to Jona as they walked through the park.

The leader of the Eclipse usually wore combat gear all the time, but for once she was wearing more feminine attire. Dressed in a simple red dress that showed off her athletic figure nicely (after all, she and the chairman were posing as couple just taking a stroll through

the park). Listening attentively to the turian's every word.

"What is the 'right' way?" Jona asked.

"IF the humans let the colonial authorities prosecute Bluestone they will create the false impression that humans are law abiding, decent, and care about the welfare of other sentient beings. We must show that they are anything but."

"And how do you propose we do that? Do you happen to have some humans on a leash?" Jona asked sarcastically.

The chairman suddenly looked around to check that nobody was nearby. Then he pulled an anti-surveillance device out of his pocket and checked that too. The palm sized device ensured that whatever was said did not go beyond a certain distance, so no one could listen in. Once he was certain that nobody else was listening, he finally replied "No, but I have the next best thing: human uniforms, armor, and weapons that will allow us to pose as UNSC soldiers."

Then the chairman looked down at his own legs and corrected himself "well you anyway...it wouldn't fit me or another turian."

"You want us to rescue that son of a bitch!" Jona said in outrage. "More to the point, how in the Goddess did you even get your hands on that sort of hardware?" Many had tried to scavenge the human's technology from several battlefields, both planetary and space borne. A fruitless effort all around as the UNSC made it a point to never leave anything behind of value, whether it be bodies, weapons, or vehicles. Whatever had been recovered was almost always never worth the effort.

"The STG supports our agenda although they don't have the courage to do it openly. as for where the salarians got it from, they didn't tell me. But I can tell you about Bluestone, it only has to LOOK like he's being rescued. Once that degenerate piece of shit is in our hands, I see no reason not to kill the bastard" Jared explained.

Jona smiled at that. Clearly happy at the thought of killing the man in question. Telling the chairman, "In that case I would be more than happy to do it."

The two continued walking in companionable silence for awhile, both consumed by thoughts of what lay ahead. But then they stumbled upon an unexpected scene. Two human parents playing with their young child in the park.

"I didn't think we would see any humans outside in public until things had calmed down more" Jona said coldly.

"How can you stand to live so close to humans?" Jared said in disgust.

"Because I'm asari." Jona replied with an evil smile.

"What do you mean by that?" the chairman asked in honest confusion.

"It means I can afford to be patient...maybe the older ones there

will die of old age before I can get to them but some time this century there WILL be another war and when that happens I can wipe out all their fucking descendants" Jona answered with a manic gleam in her eyes.

In that moment Pallin Jared understood a crucial difference between him and Jona Sederis. They both hated humanity, but Jared merely wanted to see the humans hurt, humbled, and eliminated as threat/rival to his people. Jona wanted humanity wiped out to the last man, woman, and child, preferably by her own hand.

****APUFMKII****

"You know...when I thought about seeing all of you again."Denton started, "This isn't quite exactly what I had in mind." His arms crossed and his feet on the table.

Seated around the table, were the youths that he had met a few years ago, back in orbit over Shanxi. Well, most of them. He had kept tabs on them to an extent. Staying up to date with some of the lives.

Terrence Heldin, he had since come a long way since his days in the CDF. Transferring the UNSC Marine corps, rising through the ranks and becoming a captain. He had grown out since then. Before, he was a strong, albeit somewhat thin, man. Now he looked like an Olympic champion. Where as before, when they had first met, Terence projected an aura of potential that only needed to be nurtured and developed. Now, he just projected an aura that made you listen to what he said, and follow him anywhere, even straight into the mouth of hell if it was needed.

Alexei Rasnuv, the biggest of the group he had met, and who seemed to only have gotten bigger since that time. If he didn't know better, Denton would have thought him a Spartan, as he was tall enough and muscular enough to be one. And had become a harder person, if the numerous scars and injuries were any sign. A cybernetic right arm and leg prosthetic, plus the myriad of scars. But where has his body projected an aura of intimidation, his eyes told a different story. Behind the veil of strength, was the soft hearted soul Denton remembered, and more than a little pain. He had stayed on with the CDF, if only barely. Denton barely recalled a half-heard discussion where Alexei had considered leaving the military and going back to his family, as the only son.

Katy Geran, the firebrand of their group. Despite her small stature, she had a fire in her that could put most to shame and cow them. Denton smiled when he recalled how she had managed to cow one of the Sangheili in their group to accept medical assistance. Denton had frowned slightly when he had see the ONI emblem stitched onto her uniform. Thankfully over, joining the clandestine organization had not dampened her spirits in the slightest, waving cheerily at the doctor when he came in.

And the oddball of the group, if only because of his species, Squul'de 'Squid' Qurad. The young Sangheili had done some growing up since Shanxi. Before, he was an untested, unblooded juvenile, in both body and mind. Now he looked as fearsome as the Elite warriors that had fought against humanity during the greater war. The last time Denton

had seen him, he had only just been taller than Alexei. Now, drawn to his full height, he towered over even the already massive Russian-descended colonist. Now though, he was somewhat slumped in his seat as he talked amicably with Terrence. That in and of itself was a rare sight. For the most part, humans and sangheili avoided each other like the plague. Only the newer generation, the ones born after all the wars, were not poisoned against the other species by hate and bigotry. But interaction was still rare for several reasons, the most predominant being sangheili rarely came into UNSC/UEG space and stayed for long, and most humans who associated with sangheili often founded themselves outcasted by those older, and sometimes their peers. But seeing this, meant to Denton, that the walls were slowly, but surely, beginning to crumble.

Notably absent were Maho and Cris. The marksman and tech specialist of the group. The last time Denton had seen the pair, Maho had a broken jaw and Lee had been taken away when they had wanted to check his injuries again. The last time he had looked them up, Maho had joined with the UNSC Marine corps like Terrence had, going on to join the sniper elite. Cris on other hand, had signed up with the UNSC Navy, and last he had heard; been stationed somewhere closer to the Core system of Earth.

Terrence rose from his seat and approached the doctor. "Good to see you again, sir." Holding his hand out. "It's been a while."

Taking the proffered hand, Denton replied. "Thanks, but call me Alan. After that little near death experience, I think we can call each other by name."

It was strange, but seeing these familiar faces almost made Denton forget why he had asked them to come. However, the ambassador was still too much of a professional to forget for long, especially considering the circumstances. So he decided to be direct.

"Well I suppose the reason that all of you were called here, beside being an act of fate, you are considered to be the most in touch with the locals here. That being said, just far down the toilet are we?"

"Well, to put in a word, pissed." Terrence started. "The guy basically raped a teenager, and then publicly humiliated her by recording it and sending it to everyone."

"Da, the people are very angry. Thankfully, the people here are not idiots. Not totally at least." Alexei added. "The people know who to blame, that $\mathbb{D}_2\mathbb{D}^3\mathbb{D}'\mathbb{D}^3\mathbb{D}^1\mathbb{D}^3\mathbb{D}^0$, Bluestone. Still, though, I can't blame them out they are acting, considering what was promised." Alexei was referring how the UNSC promised that only the best and brightest of humanity would be allowed on the colony. That these people represented the majority of the human race and how it behaved. "They feel that they were lied to."

In truth, humanity sent its best and brightest to Jarum. Carefully screening anyone who was going anywhere near the colony. At least for the first few months. But as the years passed and sending shipments to Jarum became more and more routine standards had fallen. By the time that Bluestone was hired as a security guard on the Merry Traveler a month ago, the screening process was little more than a formality.

"Just how bad has it gotten?" Denton asked, already feeling the impending headache. "Are we close to rioting?"

"Thankfully no." Katy confidently. "Everybody's pissed off especially the asari with young daughters but I think the fact that we've been so willing to let them do whatever they want to the bastard has really helped" She added.

"Once the animal is put down, and he will be, having, as you humans say, made his own noose, with that video of his. Afterwards, things should calm down." Squid told the ambassador.

"There have been only a few that have actually tried anything major." Terrence mentioned. "And despite however much they try, no one actually listens to them."

"Unlike the rest of Citadel space I think the people here actually like us deep down" Alexei said, putting his two cents in.

"What do you think it will take for the Citadel Races as a whole to actually like us?" Denton asked, genuinely curious as to what these people would say.

Squid laughed and muttered. "Go back in time and NOT destroy Impera." Despite how he usually spoke in the over the top fashion most of his kinsmen did, sometimes he spoke as plainly and casually as his human friends.

"He's got a pointâ€¦The Citadel Races haven't fought a real war in thousands of years...and then we introduced ourselves by attacking their capital, kidnapping their leaders, and destroying one of their most important worlds just to intimidate them. How long would it take US to forgive something like that?" Katy asked philosophically, drawing more than few eyebrows from her friends. That was not something they recalled of their old friend, waxing philosophy like she just did. More to the point, it really drove the point home, as they considered the Great War, and how the hate still permeated and resonated throughout most of the older generation, such as their parents.

Denton wasn't sure himself as to how to answer that question. He had lived through some of the recent wars, and had a hand in ending one. So he saw firsthand many of the war's atrocities. He didn't feel as much as hate towards the New Covenant as many of his peers did, but he wasn't exactly on the friendliest of terms with them either. Not all of them at least. During meetings with the New Covenant, he had always kept himself armed, no matter what. "I don't really think, they ever truly will." He answered. "No matter what happens, no matter what changes, until the new generation outnumbers the old, those who were born after Impera, will any of this hate begin to go away. And even then, I think it'll take a few generations."

"Maybe more than a few." He uttered under his breathe.

"Maybe not, sir. But I think that as long as we can avoid doing something really awful to provoke them for about a turian generation cooler heads will prevail" Katy said optimistically.

Denton internally winced at the statement as he was reminded of

Operation Spartacus. Hoping that the hubris of his superiors wouldn't leave humanity at war with the entire galaxy. But knowing he could never share such fears with anyone, even those in front of him.

"Perhaps, Katy, perhaps. We can only hope that it does. And that nothing else should occur to widen the gap while we try to bridge it." Terrence said, optimistically. Not knowing outside forces conspired to ensure that what was a bridgeable gap, became an impassable abyss.

****APUFMKII****

Not far off from the colony precinct, in the backroom of a nearby store, a collection of crates sat in the center as a number of asari in civilian garb entered the room. Quickly they pried off the lids and pulled out their contents. Any human who would have seen them, would have recognized them instantly: the battle dress uniform of the UNSC's elite 105th Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, or "The Helljumpers". Strictly regulated, illegal possession was warrant for a life sentence in human space. The asari quickly began stripping off their civilian clothes before donning the bodysuits and the armor itself.

"Alright ladies, time to play dress-up! Get this stuff on and let's get moving. You all know what to do!" Jona Sederis ordered, already suited in her own ODSST gear. "Once you get that shit on, get over here and grab your weapons. You read up on how to use them, now make it look good."

"And Don't mix up the armor you idiots!" She shouted at a pair of asari, "Some of these things have decals, and we need to make this look good!" Jona, despite however crazy and sadistic she may be, could not be called sloppy. At least when it came to a job. If she and her Eclipse band was given a certain objective and a certain way to achieve it, they would. But if you left out any details...on your head so be it.

As the last asari finished putting on the armor and taking a weapon, along with a hand full of ammunition, Jona began waving them to the human vehicles, 'Warthogs', she had heard them be called. Unlike everything else, these had been 'procured' from the human civilians, then repainted and modified to look like those at the consulate. "C'mon get the lead out ladies! We haven't got all day!" She ordered, using terms and phrases she had heard the human soldiers at the consulate use. They obeyed and exited into the backlot of the store where the vehicles were, climbing into the driver, passenger and rear compartments, and one case, the mounted machine gun. The last one had actually been procured from the humans. By the same ones who had supplied the armor, weapons and ammunition.

Time was now a critical factor, because their informant in the New Ozai police department (who was a member of the Sons) had told them that Bluestone was being moved to the courthouse today for his trial. Not even Jona was crazy enough to attack the police station or the courthouse (both of which were already on high alert) so they had to grab Bluestone while he was being moved.

This meant several things. The first that it would be much easier to 'rescue' him, as they would only have to fight through a protection

detail rather than an entire police force. The second that it would be in plain sight of the entire colony, meaning that there would be no way for the humans to be able to say it wasn't them.

As the last of her disguised soldiers mounted the Warthogs, she slapped the roof of the lead vehicle, which she was riding in the passenger seat. "Alright let's move out!" One by one the vehicles left the backlot, driving out onto the street, just as the convoy carrying bluestone was passing, seamlessly joining it. Sederis's own taking the front.

The convoy consisted of a chain of vehicles, twelve in all, not including those being used by Sederis and her forces. Nine regular police cruisers, with three uniforms in each, and three armored trucks in the center. Only one contained Bluestone and a light protection detail inside.

It wasn't long before the radios crackled to life. "Hey, who are you guys? Nobody said anything about additional escorts." Someone asked.

Jella picked up the radio receiver. "UNSC 105th infantry. We thought it would be a good idea if no one knew about us until the last second. Someone heard that somebody was planning on trying to get our 'package'."

"Huh, well that makes sense I guess. Glad to have you with us." The voice on the other end replied. "Well lets get this scumbag over to courthouse. The sooner we get there, the sooner this scum gets what's coming to him."

Jella had to smile at those words. 'Oh you have no idea.' She thought. "Copy that. Let's get this done." She slotted the receiver back into it's slot and leaning back into her seat. "Now we wait."

Three years ago this mission wouldn't have been possible, because New Ozai's population had been so small that the courthouse and police station had been in the same building. But such an arrangement didn't fit the 'new' Jarum. Both the courthouse and the police station had their own large buildings (with plenty of parking) on either side of town, giving Jona's plenty of time to spring her trap.

Sederis had planned this carefully, keeping in mind the route the police cars were taking. Knowing that she had to attack when there was virtually no chance of the cops getting reinforcements, because taking on the entire police force (and most likely the human soldiers from the UNSC consulate once they realized what was going on) was a suicide mission. So she waited until the convoy was passing through a tunnel (whose material would block police signals), as the tail end entered, then she made her move.

"Now!" Her driver slammed on the brakes, bringing the entire convoy to a screeching halt. The rear mounted turret swiveled to face the entire convoy and cut loose, sending 12.7mm death down it's length. Cars, and bodies alike were shredded as the armor piercing, anti-material rounds made quick work of everything between Sederis and the armored truck.

At the end of the convoy, the rest of the Eclipse dismounted,

shooting down most of the police force before they could realize just what was happening. Officers and vehicles alike were splattered in red, slumping in their seats or crumpling to the floor as a few tried to exit their vehicles. Blood, offal and brain matter filled the air.

But not all the cops died, many of them were hit with Tactical Training Rounds that merely stunned them; locking up their clothes and knocking most of them out. However, some still died from headshots, as despite everything, were still lethal. When one of her people moved to start finishing off the survivors, Sederis screamed "NO YOU IDIOT! WE NEED WITNESSES!", her words relayed directly to the asari's helmet, making the maiden clutch her head in pain at the yell.

Sederis had purposely given her troops a mixed set of magazines, consisting of TTR and FMJ rounds. While obviously they couldn't kill everyone, as that would defeat the purpose, she still wanted a guarantee that there would some witnesses. Of course, she hadn't made sure who had what, so they all still operated with regular efficiency.

As she looked at the survivor whose life she had just saved, she smiled. It was a turian, and apparently still wide awake, despite the fact that his clothes were keeping him from moving. Of course she, if the slimmer body was any indicator, was still dumbfounded. She gave a mock-two finger salute before turning away, making sure that the silver bars on her armor could be clearly seen by the survivor.

"Alright you lot! Let's crack these things open!" Without further orders, her crew moved to open the doors to first of three armored trucks, either taking out their omnitools to hack the doors or taking positions to aim inside when they opened.

Before any of them could start their hacks, the doors to two of the transports swung open. Twenty four heavily armed and armored Special Response Squads(SRS) burst from them, the Colonial equivalent of the human's Special Weapons and Tactics(SWAT). In any other situation, the twelve would have made quick work on most anything the colony could throw at them.

Jona's however, were not of Jarum. All of them had been baptized fire in the Terminus, and some in the short conflict with the humans. The officers stood no chance.

Half were gunned down as they dismounted, the others didn't survive past five minutes. Though one got off a lucky shot at Jona, the bullet aimed right at her chest, only for it to bury itself in the armor and never come close to penetrating. The lucky, or unlucky, depending on one's point of view, had their head blown to pieces for their efforts.

The corpses still warm, they moved in on the final truck. This time, as they hacked the door, the doors didn't burst open. It didn't take long before they finally unlocked it, and the doors swung open. Letting out the ultimate cause of all this carnage, gazing at the 'human' troops with surprise and then a growing grin. Allowing the disguised asari to get their first good look at Thomas Zacharia Bluestone. Physically, the man was nothing special: just slightly

taller than average height and signs of having once been incredibly fit. Along with signs of fat starting to appear in place of the muscle.

"We're here to rescue you Mister Bluestone" Jona told the man, her voice digitally altered by her helmet, just enough to hide any hints that she might not be human.

"Well it took you long enough!" His arrogant grin not fading in the slightest. "I thought I was going to have go through this stupid trial. I mean, it's only an alien. Not like I did anything wrong." Flashing a smile at Jona, he added. "Hey, you're a woman under all that right? How's about you and me get a drink after all this?"

Jona bit back the disgust she was feeling at the little shit trying to hit on her. "Maybe later, _sweetheart,_ but how's about we get out of here first?" With little pause she grabbed Thomas before dragging him to one of the Warthogs, and throwing him in the back unceremoniously. Climbing onboard herself, she yelled. "Let's go!"

The driver's slammed the pedals, and the Warthogs lurched forward and out of the tunnels. Driving over both vehicles and bodies.

Despite his bravado Bluestone hadn't actually expected to be rescued. Although he had been an accomplished athlete in college (or 'big man on campus' as he would have said) Thomas had simply drifted from one dead end job to another after graduating. His bad attitude, lousy work ethic, and tendency to start fights with co-workers, forcing him to quit or get fired over and over again. At this point his resume was a joke because he had no References that would speak well of him. The only reason he had even gotten a job on the _Merry Traveler_ was because his brother was the captain, and after he had accidentally sent his brother (along with everybody else on the colony) a video of himself raping a child, even his brother had essentially disowned him.

'But I'm obviously more important than I thought if the UNSC sent troops to rescue me' Bluestone thought as the vehicle rushed towards its destination. Planning on rubbing his brother's face in that fact the first chance he got. But as, what he beginning to think of as his personal guard, continued heading to the outskirts of the New Ozai, he began to get nervous. They should have already been at the Consulate already, or maybe they were taking him to one of those secret safe houses like he saw in the movies. 'Yeah, yeah. That's it, they're just taking me somewhere safe.' He thought to himself. A belief that continued to fade as the lights from New Ozai continued to grow dimmer.

"Ah...where are we going?" Bluestone asked the armored personnel in the vehicle with him. When none of them answered he got even more nervous. Remembering all the damage their weapons had done to the police officers as he looked at their guns.

A truly brave (or perhaps simply foolhardy) man might have tried to escape at that point. But for all his bluster and bullying Bluestone was a coward. Lacking the courage to stand up to people who seemed ready, willing, and able to hurt him.

"Okay then...I guess you can tell me later" Bluestone said with a

weak attempt at a smile.

It wasn't long before they finally came to a stop, in what essentially the middle of nowhere. The lights of New Ozai could still been seen, but at this distance, nobody was paying attention to what happened out in the sticks. As they began to dismount, someone grabbed Thomas by his shirt before throwing him out of the truck.

Landing flat on his face, he let out an 'oof' of pain. As the heavyset man wearily got to his feet, he came to the horrifying realization that this was NOT a rescue. Just as one of the armored figures took her helmet off.

Revealing the blue face of an asari. As he watched in shock the others also took off their helmets, revealing that they were asari as well. All of them staring at him maliciously as they observed their human prey.

Then he grunted as one of them threw a shovel at him. Which painfully impacted Bluestone in the stomach. As Jona commanded "start digging mammal."

Bluestone tried putting on a brave face, but already it was starting to crack. Rarely had he been on the other end of the stick, being the victim was not a familiar experience for him. His eyes started watering as the reality of the situation had finally gotten through his ego and thick skull, and was now setting in. "C'mon, can't we make a deal? I'm sure we can work something out?"

Jona sneered and backhanded him, sending him back to the ground. "I said, **dig**." With tears beginning to leak out of his eyes, Thomas grabbed the shovel and started digging. As he dug, he kept trying to make a deal, anything for him to live through this. Only when one pulled out a knife and threatened to cut off his manhood, did he finally get the message. Switching over between crying and moaning about the pain from working the shovel, only to be told, "Then dig faster." His hands grew blisters, which began to bleed as he kept digging, his back beginning to ache and burn from the effort, and his tears finally stopped, having actually run out.

Only once the pit was at about at his shoulders, did he finally hear, "Stop."

The man stopped digging and climbed out, then moved away from the hole, earning a scowl from Jona as he did so. Promptly ordering him "now get into the middle of the hole and lay down."

Thomas Zacharia Bluestone was hardly a genius, most people who knew him would have labelled the man an arrogant fool, but he was smart enough to realize that he had literally been digging his own grave.

"No" the rapist whimpered, pleading with the asari much like his victim had pleaded with him. And receiving just as much mercy.

"Get in the hole or I'll cut your balls off and make you eat them" Jona hissed.

But Bluestone refused to get in the hole. He knew that as soon as he

did his life was over. Continuing to plead with and beg the asari mercenaries for mercy.

"Just get in the goddess damned hole!" Sederis screamed as she violently backhanded the man.

Bluestone was openly sobbing now but refused to budge. Thanks to his bulk he was heavy enough that none of the asari wanted to drag his corpse to the hole. But one of Jona's followers was even more impatient and trigger happy than she was, shooting the man in the groin with a hollow point round when he refused to move. The round mushroomed on impact, flattening itself as it ripped its way through before explosively flying out on the other side, turning Bluestone's manhood into nothing more than tatters of flesh. His voice rose several octaves as he screamed in pain, squealing at the top of his lungs. Clutching what was left and bringing his knees together as he dropped, whimpering.

"DAMN IT ELNORA NOW WE HAVE TO DRAG HIM!" Jona screamed at the youngest asari there.

Elnora visibly cringes at the verbal abuse. This was her first real combat mission, and the only reason that Jona had taken her at all was because she had been having trouble recruiting enough asari for this mission to meet the deadline.

"Sorry ma'am" she whimpered.

"Don't just say you're sorry girl drag his bleeding ass to the hole!" Jona yelled.

Elnora muttered curses and insults under her breath as she used her biotics to force Thomas into the hole, landing on his face again at the bottom.

"No please" the agonized Bluestone wept, expecting another shot to end his life any second. Already rapidly bleeding to death as he lay at the bottom of the hole, blood gushing out of the ruined mess that was once his groin. But the expected bullet never came.

Then a wad of dirt hit him in the face.

A moment later another mound of earth hit him in the torso. As Bluestone looked up and saw Jona Sederis leering down at him as she held the shovel, he realized the truth. They weren't going to shoot him to death. They were going to bury him alive.

"NO PLEASE I'M SORRY I'M SORRY LET ME OUT LET ME OUT!" Thomas Bluestone cried out, any remaining pride or dignity forgotten as he tried to beg for his life. The sadistic expression on Jona's face telling him that it was futile.

"Stupid fucking male the only reason you're getting off so easy is because we don't have time to do this properly!" one of the asari Bluestone couldn't see replied. At which Jona laughed and shoveled some more dirt onto the man.

As his head is buried in dirt Thomas Zacharia Bluestone quietly suffocates. Unmourned, unloved, and buried in an unmarked grave in the woods. Yet some would say he still got off easy. And as Jona and

the rest of her Eclipse rode away, she smiled, eager to see the results of what she had done this day.

****APUFMKII****

The Arbiter had never spent much time in the elite medical ward of High Charity. As a warrior of his caliber, to admit the need for such medical aid, was both embarrassing and shameful. And many of those he led under his command had either died from their wounds, or survived them without considerable outside aid. Not to mention that he had rarely been anywhere near the great city during the wars.

Yet now, he could not be more grateful that the great station had such a facility for all those that lived aboard it. Including for his people.

The ward itself, which could hold dozens of injured or wounded at any one time, was sparsely populated. Just over a dozen were occupied, more than half consisting of the warriors who had piloted the prototypes against the humans.

When the pilots had first returned after the destruction of the human ONI facility, Thel had personally seen to it that he would congratulate them all. Yet, when it came time to return, only four of the seven fighters came back under their own power, and barely at that. Instead of gently landing on the deck, they had more or less crashed to the decks with all the grace of a drunk stone hunter. The other three were later recovered by Phantoms and brought back to the ship.

When they had checked on the pilots inside, it was a sobering sight. Killing Thel's enthusiasm in a single moment.

Three of the pilots had died from a massive dose of electricity right into their bodies. Two simply had their hearts beat so fast that they had exploded inside their chests, with minor burns scars where the energy had arced into their bodies. One had not been so lucky and somehow been literally boiled alive, if the remains inside his fighter had been any indication. The blood in his veins boiling until he had quite literally, explode.

Another three were hardly in better condition. Their bodies had suffered similar electric-based injuries. Burns scars across their bodies from where the electricity had touched them, their heart pushed to the brink and surviving by the grace of their gods. Their brains had also been affected, shutting them down, causing uncontrollable and unpredictable spasms and convulsions. Two of them were in a coma, and the third was in no shape to speak, let alone answer any questions.

Only one had been in any condition to speak and answer questions. Speaking to the Arbiter from his hospital bed. Once Thel would have looked down on any warrior reduced to such a state, but age had given him wisdom (or at least perspective). When he asked the pilot, just what had happened during the test, how the craft behaved and responded, he had answered.

"Milord Arbiter, the craft, while I controlled it, I felt as though the gods themselves were at my back. They protected me from harm and death, it felt as though it was an extension of me, a part of me.

Forgive my blasphemy, my Arbiter, but for a moment, I stood alongside the Forerunners themselves." After the momentary shock at those words, many of whom would consider sacrilege, Thel had then asked, if he would do so again. Knowing just the cost that may be exacted. And he had responded, "To quote the humans, 'I regret that I only have one life to give.'"

"Yet you described the experience as painful to your healers" the Arbiter noted.

"True my lord I was the lucky one" the pilot admitted.

"Perhaps this technology isn't the boon we thought" Thel said as much to himself as to anyone else.

"No!" The pilot protested, trying to rise from his bed. "You cannot throw this away! This is what our gods want milord! To become their equals, you ca-" The pilot gasped from the overtaxation of his overexerted body, collapsing back onto the bed.

"Save your strength warrior you have done enough" the Arbiter said in uncharacteristically soothing tones.

After taking a moment to recover, the pilot continued passionately "its more than a ship milord...its a chance for us and our new allies to rise again and have our vengeance on those who claimed to be our allies and then betrayed and abandoned us...with fleets of these vessels we can finally become the greatest power in the galaxy again."

Compared to the Arbiter himself, the pilot was young, naive, and relatively unaccomplished. Yet as he observed the sincerity of the warrior who had already suffered so much for this venture, he found himself swayed by the words. Believing that the sangheili could rise again. "Rest, warrior. You have done your part. Now it is for others to do theirs."

After that fateful meeting, Thel had the craft thoroughly examined as to why these deaths and injuries had occurred. Wanting protect his warriors from further harm. And thus had held nothing back in his search for answers.

Evidently, the very thing that made the new craft so lethal, was the very thing that made it so dangerous to it's pilots. The Mass Effect drive core of the craft, like all those like it, had a buildup of static electricity as the core was used again and again. The capacitor's installed to help contain that charge had not been enough. Releasing lethal amounts of electricity into the confines of the ship. Making matters worse was the fact that it was nothing easily fixed. The only way to dispose of the static buildup was to discharge it. The only way to reduce the risk of a lethal discharge was to limit the number of drive core uses. Either through a programmed inhibitor, which would require a new design, or a pilot's self-restraint, the only viable option. Nevertheless, he could continue to use the Quarian built fighters in attacks against ONI facilities in New Covenant space, as long as the warriors were volunteers and knew the risks.

The Arbiter knew that in the high stakes game of empires he was playing with the humans there were few second chances. If the New

Covenant fell, he doubted that its rivals would allow the Covenant Races to rise again. So Thel would do what he must, certain that the humans would react once they realized the sangheili now had finally declared, ****Enough****.

****APUFMKII****

Back with the Rebellion, new additions were about to join the fight against the Hegemony.

"Or least that's what he promised usâ€¦" Jella groaned. A sentiment shared by the other rebel fighters with her out in the sticks of Khar'Shan. Her and about a dozen others, had commandeered a half dozen trucks and followed John's directions to drive out into what was essentially the middle of nowhere. Far from any of the major or even minor towns and cities. Even on a homeworld like Khar'Shan, there were locations totally void of any major settlement or development.

When John had first told them all of what they were going to be doing, how they were heading out into the sticks to receive reinforcements and supplies, Jella, and the rest of them, had assumed that they would be attacking another slave owners home, or perhaps even a military outpost.

Instead, what they had driven out to the middle of nowhere and been waiting there for the past several hours. John had been standing outside, waiting the entire time. Jella sighed, she had no reason not to trust the strange alien, if he ever told her what species he was, she couldn't recall. After all, he was the one who had saved her, had gotten this entire rebellion started in the first place and was the reason it had gone so well as it had. She had no doubt, that if it were not for him, she would have been left for dead and used in that alley years ago.

Looking at John, she started going over everything that had happened since their first encounter, of just how much her life had changed. From her self-liberation from her abusive master, to always being one mistake away from death or worse, and then literally falling into the arms of her savior. Then forming the core of their rebellion, attacking the homes of the rich and corrupt, liberating slaves, and even raiding supply stores and military bases. Surviving whatever the Hegemony threw at them, from military patrols and surprise raids, to the destruction of Pride Rock City.

Then there were the rumors that she had been hearing, whispered among the masses. Across the Hegemony, not just Khar'Shan, but on other Hegemony worlds, there were rumors of other rebellions rising of their own accord. Not small ones, of individuals or even individual households, but a collective uprisings. Insurrections arising across planets as one, the survivors and escaped banding together and continuing their insurrection. As a result, the Hegemony's responses were becoming increasingly militant. Instead of state police and mercenaries, trained soldiers, with the weapons and armor to match, were tasked with ending the rebellions. There less efforts of trying to capture the slaves, and the number of dead continued to rise. But in terms of numbers, these deaths mattered little. The Hegemony's own greed ensure that for every one lost rebel, a hundred more were waiting to be liberated.

And all of it, was made possible by the fact that John Doe had saved her on that fateful night. On what she assumed was little more than a whim and an act of faith that she would follow. Something John deserved in turn, Jella had thought when he first told her of what he had planned.

So here they all were. Waiting, and bored out of their skulls, or for some, twitching with nervous energy at being in the open like this. Then John suddenly started making hand signs, not to Jella or anyone else, as they didn't make sense if they were. John began to take a few steps back, then dust began to float up from the ground in front of him, like when a dropship came in for a landing.

Jella and the others watched with bewilderment, wondering just what was going on, before the answer revealed itself in true ONI fashion. Everyone's eyes shot wide open as hexagons of light, shadows, and energy appeared out of thin air, before peeling off and shattering in a thousand particles and then fading into nothing, revealing the black craft beneath as the ONI prowler touched down. No, that wasn't right. It looked though as it had touched down, but it was still above the ground, if only just.

The two 'wings' if they could be called that, just barely hovered above the ground. Then, from the seemingly seamless craft, a ramp appeared from the center and lowered itself, again just barely avoiding touching the ground through some unknown anti-gravity technology. Figures and crates began to make their way from the belly of the craft and down the ramp.

Jella's comm. clicked in her ear. "Korragan, get the others out here and beginning loading the supplies." The order was clipped and held no room for questions. A tone that Jella had become uncomfortably familiar with, when it came to John. It had become more common to hear his no-nonsense tone when addressing others, than, compared to the former, his calm and strengthening tone. Jella responded in the affirmative before relaying her own orders to the others rebels, directing them to escort those coming off the ship and loading their cargo onto the trucks.

Sparing another glance at John, she almost tripped over her own two feet at the sight of _**another**_ armored warrior like John disembark from the craft, flanked by similar, if slightly smaller, others.

John watched as the his fellow Spartans disembarked from the ONI prowler with equal measures of disapproval and joy. He recognized the lead Spartan, and the only S-II of the group immediately by her gait and walk. Giving her a Spartan Smile, the closest a Spartan ever got to an emotional outburst, he stepped forward. "Kelly."

The fastest of the Spartans stopped in front of her superior and cocked a hip, "Hello John, good to see you too." She returned the Spartan Smile, "Surprised to see me?"

"Somewhat." John responded. "I assume mother had something to do with this? I took care not to leave any information behind."

"Yeah, she 's worried about you John, we all were." Kelly almost seemed to fidget, but she hid it well enough, even from John. "She told us everything, the operation, ONI, all of it."

"I assume that they want us to initiate Phase II?" He asked. Communications back to UNSC/UEG space had been, problematic to say the least. Despite the numerous off-world communications towers scattered across the planet, few were powerful enough to send a message the distance they required without needing other worlds to receive and then relay the transmissions. To get around this, dead drops had been used to communicate back and forth with the UNSC. A slow, if secure and assured means of communications. Lately however, thanks to the Rebellion and the Hegemony's responses, even that was becoming a difficult venue.

Kelly shook her head. "Not yet, command wants to wait a bit longer. But there's news, I'll explain it once we're gone. I don't like being out in the open."

John nodded. Next to being out of their armor, Spartans never felt more exposed than when on open ground. Even when actually nude, surprisingly enough. "Fair enough. These are the rest of our reinforcements?" He asked, referring to the Spartans, S-IVs if he was correct, standing together in a loose square behind Kelly.

Kelly nodded, with more than a hint of disappointment. "ONI decided it would be a good idea to see how well they fare against these new forces. And to see if they are worth the credits being spent on them. They've almost supplied us with several prototypes. I'll show them to you later."

It was no real secret that the S-IIIs did not hold the S-IVs in the same light as their fellow S-IIIs or even the S-IIIs. Not all of them at any rate. They gave the S-IVs the respect they deserved for making it through the training and selection process and earning the right to be wear the MJOLNIR armor and be called Spartans. However, amongst the Spartan Corps, there were Spartans and then there were Spartans. A distinction only seen by those within the Corps itself. While most of the newly minted S-IVs saw becoming a Spartan as the highest possible honor, and did all that they could to measure up and honor their still living predecessors, some saw it as a more of a sign that they were superior.

In terms of real combat, the Spartan-IV generation, all of them, were untested. Aside from some anti-insurrectionist activity and the Old Covenant Remnants aka The Heretics, none of the S-IVs had ever been in a prolonged conflict scenario like they were about to be plunged into. This would, more or less, be a true test of the capabilities of the S-IVs, and thus their worth. If they proved themselves, it would mean the S-IV Project was more than ready for a true war if it came to it. If they didn't, then it would be up to the S-IIIs and S-IIIs to ensure that they and any future generations would be.

Judging by how Kelly obviously considered this particular group of S-IVs, it was probably composed of mostly the latter. One of the S-IVs, his armored colored an ostentatious red and gold, stepped forward. Completely disregarding the fact that both S-II's were his superiors, he called out. "YO! Chief! What's up?" Walking up to them with more than a good amount of swagger, he placed a hand on the much taller Spartan's shoulder like they were old friends, when they were anything but. "How's it going?"

John glanced at the Spartan's right shoulder, which prominently

displayed a grunt skull with a phallus going through it's skull, identifying the Spartan. Diego Piedra. Part of the Third class of graduating Spartans. Lone Wolf. Top of the class in marksmanship, stealth and demolitions. Multiple infractions for insubordination, minor dereliction of duty, and multiple counts of improper conduct while on duty. And considered to be an embarrassment to the Spartan Corps by many. Many wondered how he had managed to pass the screening process of the Spartan Training Program as his borderline arrogant and cocky behavior would have immediately sent up red flags and booted him from the program. Even John, who sometimes personally oversaw the screening process wasn't sure. Rumor's had it that Diego had connections, or at the very least, came from a very well off family, and that more than a few credits had greased the wheels.

As for why he had hadn't been kicked from the program by now, the reason was simple, they literally couldn't. Officially, his outstanding performance that allowed for his graduation was the reason. Unofficially, it was because his training and augmentations could not be allowed into the public arena, which dismissal from the program and corps would have done. With the Second Insurrection still fresh in many people's minds, the UNSC was unwilling to let such secrets roam freely. Thus, contrary to Diego's boasts, he was more of a dog on a leash, than someone who was truly untouchable.

John Doe moved out of Diego's reach as he coolly said "Phase II...you and the other newcomers will assist us in making the rebellion so big and public that the Hegemony can no longer deny it with any credibility."

"It shouldn't be too hard the four-eyes don't even have any decent weapons" the younger Spartan replied with casual racism (and obvious arrogance).

Jella and the other rebels bristled at arrogant soldier's dismissal. Except for Cara T'Val, the only rebel there who had obsessively watched the news during UNSC/Citadel war. As she thought 'five-fingered hands like my people and the batarians, not worried about pissing off the Council, weapons technology obviously more advanced than anybody in known space has...THEIR HUMANS!'

The Spartans turned, drawing their sidearms at the same time as they heard the tell-tale subtle clicks of a Mass Effect weapon expanding into it's ready position, thinking that somehow the Hegemony had found them. Instead, only finding Cara, rifle drawn and aimed at John, a look of rage and hate plastered on her face.

"Hey, just what does this bitch thinks she's doing?" Diego snorted. "Does she really think that little peashooter going to do anything against us?"

John ignored Diego, only looking straight ahead at Cara and the other rebels. The others were equally shocked at Cara aiming a weapon at the man who had helped them so much and made this rebellion possible, let alone the standoff. A quick glance revealed even Jella was surprised, her jaw dropped and her arms slack in surprise.

Not lowering his own weapon in the slightest, the S-II ordered, "Cara, lower the weapon and stand down."

"Fuck you!" She shouted back. "You're human! All of you are!" At her

declaration, a few of the rebels began reaching for their weapons, only stopping once some of the Spartans trained their weapons on them. "What, was this all sort of sick joke by you people!? Teasing us with the idea of freedom and revenge?"

John didn't dignify that with a response, instead he ordered, "All of you, stand down! Korragan, relieve Cara of her weapon. Now." His tone allowed no argument, so Jella moved to relieve the asari of her weapon, only to find a pistol in her face, with the rifle being held one handed at the Spartans, if a bit shakily, but her attention was still directed at the Spartans.

"Back off! You, you lied to me! You never said you were working with humans!" Her body was screaming the fear and betrayal that she felt. "How? How could you work with such monsters?!"

Lowering his pistol, as John knew the rifle would overheat before his shields gave way, John depolarized his visor. "Cara." The asari's eyes locked with Johns. "Lower the weapon, please. I did not hide who or what I was. But neither did I openly declare it." Holstering his pistol, he continued. "Lower the weapon, and we'll work this out."

Jella hadn't even drawn her weapon, but had her hands raised in a placating manner. "Cara, love. Just calm down. Let's just talk about this alright? Just calm down."

"Why!? Don't you know what they did! Or don't you care?!" Cara yelled, glancing towards Jella. "Or are you a monster like them? Was everything you showed me a lie?" Cara had now fully turned her attention to Jella, looking away from the Spartans. A grave mistake.

The moment Cara had turned her head, Spartan Kelly-082 had bursted toward her. Every Spartan is capable of speeds up to 55 kilometers per hour, whether that be inside or outside the armor. Their incredible reflexes allowed to them actually think for a split second, as time seems to slow down around them, colloquially, this was called Spartan Time. Kelly however, was faster still, capable of bursts of 62 kilometers an hour. Meaning, the moment Cara had finished her sentence, Kelly had disarmed her, grabbed her and incapacitated her before anyone else knew what was happening.

Cara tried to thrash from under the Spartan, but Kelly's iron grip kept those efforts to a minimum. Jella approached John, "Doe, just what is she talking about?" Hearing suppressed laughter, she looked behind the Spartan to see Diego trying his best to contain his laughter.

"John Doe? Man, I knew the older guys were unimaginative, but damn! I didn't think it was this bad." He whispered to the other S-IVs. No one said anything in response, barring one of them cuffing Diego across the head.

John shook his head before turning back to Jella. "Get everyone and everything loaded onto the trucks." He ordered, "I'll explain later." When Jella opened her mouth to protest, he kept his visor depolarized to look directly at her. The words dying in her throat, Jella's jaw snapped shut before nodding and moving to assist with the loading.

Turning to the other Spartans, he ordered, "One of you to a truck, each." Pointing each of the Spartans then to a truck before addressing Kelly specifically. "You ride with me. I'll fill you in on the way back to headquarters."

With a nod, Kelly stood up, bringing Cara up with her as Jella came walking up to them. The batarian taking Cara in her arms and whispering comforting words as she moved to board a different truck, when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Following it, she found herself looking at two polarized faceplates again, but recognized John's voice when he said, "You two should join us as well. I'll tell you everything."

****APUFMKII****

John Doe knew on a certain level killing Cara T'Val would be the easiest thing to do. She appeared hostile at this point, and had learned things that ONI would prefer to stay buried. So eliminating her seemed the most straightforward option.

But Jella Korragan had bonded with the young asari to the point that killing Cara could turn the rebel leader against them. Not to mention how Cara was somewhat curbing the rebel leader's bloodlust. And without Jella there would basically be no (native) rebellion in the Hegemony. Because ONI operatives like John Doe had been building up Jella's reputation in order to give the slaves someone to believe in. If Cara died, it would either break Jella, or send her over the edge, and quite possibly turn the Rebellion, into nothing but terrorism.

Moreover, John Doe had always known that trying to keep the rebel leaders in the dark indefinitely about the nature of their off-world allies was futile. You just couldn't maintain the level of secrecy necessary while working alongside somebody day in and day out. Especially during combat conditions.

Besides, Operation Spartacus would be pointless (from ONI's perspective) if rebels leaders did not feel any sense of gratitude or loyalty to ONI/humanity once the Hegemony was overthrown, and for that to happen they had to know the truth (at least about who their allies were) before the end.

And if John Doe was honest with himself, he had to admit that he found the idea of murdering Cara distasteful. Over the time that they had been working together he had come to see the asari as something of a comrade, and certainly as somebody under his protection. This operation had done a lot to change his views regarding non-humans. From the start, he had kept Jella and the others at arm's length, after all, the mistrust and wariness from decades of attempted genocide did not go away so easily. And yet, it had. Granted he would never trust any of them as much as a fellow soldier or marine, but certainly more so than he ever expected to.

Eventually John Doe, Kelly, Jella, and Cara ended up at another safe house in the capital. Which they stocked with some of the weapons and other supplies ONI had just supplied. The rest of the reinforcements and supplies going to other rebel hideouts scattered throughout batarian homeworld.

Once that had all been settled and there was nothing else that immediately needed to be done, Jella Korrigan, with Cara still by her side, cornered John Doe. Pointing at the Spartan and saying imperiously, "You said you were going to tell us everything so talk!"

John didn't even blink at Jella's tone, as under the circumstances, she was justified. "Where do you want me to begin?"

"For one thing, why in the name of the Gods is she," Jella pointing at Cara, "so frightened by you? No, by your species?"

"Perhaps, you could ask her why?" John asked, referring to Cara. "Then I will say my piece."

Cara T'Val suddenly realized that Jella Korrigan had never even heard of humanity and its violent introduction to the rest of the galaxy. Like virtually all slaves in the Hegemony Jella had been kept isolated and ignorant of the outside world, and she certainly had had no time for learning while living on the street (and on the run from the state police). So Cara decided to start from the beginning.

"About five years ago the Citadel Races met humanity for the first time and they immediately went to war with us. I admit that trigger happy krogan and turians may have fired the first shots but then they decided to rampage across our space; destroying entire colonies, killing millions of people, and putting the fear of the goddess into everybody. When the Council tried to negotiate an end to the bloodshed the humans violated the flag of truce and attacked the Citadel itself, taking the Council hostage and killing everybody in their way. Then they took their fleet to the turian home system and made the Council watch as they destroyed one of the most heavily populated worlds in civilized space, just to make our leaders agree to their terms. And even after all that they still destroyed a few warships after the peace treaty was signed to rub everybody's noses in their victory." the asari patiently said, explaining the historical events as she understood them.

Jella was in shock, her mouth slack jawed as she kept looking back and forth between Cara and John. And Jella knew that her lover wasn't lying, a little known side effect to constant melding. True, she had no reason to have any loyalty or to even care for the Citadel races, after all, what reason could she? They had not done anything to try and end the Hegemony's cruel and sometimes sadistic ways. They had blatantly turned their backs and pretended that people like Jella and Cara didn't even exist. The shock was more from the sheer magnitude of what John's species, humanity, had done within a year of first contact.

When she looked to John to see if he would deny any of this, indeed she even expected him to, he did the total opposite.

"Yes, everything Cara has said is true. But there are many facts that she, and likely galactic society at large, is unaware of. We waged war against the Citadel Races, because we took their actions as an act of war. They struck one of our colonies, decimating the population. I am unsure how many, if any, were kidnapped and taken off-world, but they reduced a population of almost a million, to only a few thousand. Your commanders committed a number of war crimes by

their own laws, including launching a number of low-grade nuclear warheads at the planet."

"We saw that as a declaration of war, and responded in turn. My people had survived a war that nearly saw the extinction of our entire species, that had ended only a few decades ago. Our survival was by sheer chance of a millennia old legacy. As for your Council, we attempted to make a peace, but they tried to coddle us, neuter us and put us under their control as though we were mere children. And then one of your leaders revealed that he had one of our greatest heroes in his possession. We demanded the man's return, and he refused it. The sacking of Palaven was for that reason alone. For one man, we laid waste to the Turian home system."

"As for the destruction of Impera, my leaders did not approve it. They were unaware of it until it had been done. The crew of the ship responsible, was handed over to the Citadel Council to be tried for their war crimes."

In truth though, even John Doe wasn't sure whether or not Admiral Parangosky had really authorized the destruction of Impera. Such an action would hardly be out of character for the ruthless old woman. Moreover, he also had reason to suspect that ONI had not actually turned over the crew responsible, but he was hardly going to admit that to this audience.

"In regards to the breach following the ratification of the Treaty, it was by the ship that we had come to rescue. A ship that had not been seen or heard from in decades, it's AI acting on it's standing orders, given to it decades ago. When it destroyed those warships, it was under the presumption that it was imprisoned by the enemy, and did what anyone else would have done under those circumstances. We could not have stopped it if we had tried."

Jella simply snorted. Blaming the destruction of Impera on soldiers acting without orders and warships destroyed after a treaty was signed on a rogue AI sounded like the kind of bullshit that the Hegemony had been shilling to the batarian people for generations. It didn't even occur to her to believe such unlikely sounding justifications for murder, to the point that the rebel didn't even feel the need to comment on it.

"You, laid waste to the Turian home system, for a single ship, a single man!" Cara shouted, in disbelief of the Spartan's words, "What is wrong with you people! He can't have-" The words died in her throat as the Spartan leveled a glare at her that made her feel small again, being scolded by her mother.

"That, individual, Cara T'Val, is the reason why my race continues to exist. The war may have ended for another reason entirely, but Preston Jeremiah Cole, was the reason humanity fought to the last man. He was the reason humanity would not surrender. When we were at the brink of despair, of giving in to the onslaught of our enemies, he stood before them and said, 'No more'. He is not just a hero amongst my people, he is a symbol. Someone, that we would all die for, if it meant he could return home."

"I don't care about human symbols or the lies you tell yourselves to justify killing others...I want to know John...I am asking you as the person who has fought beside you, believed in you, and trusted you

with my life...are you here just to continue your war with the Council Races...do you want to eliminate the Hegemony just to weaken the Citadel and once its gone you'll just leave us all to die?" Jella says passionately as she glares at the Spartan.

John Doe has faced many enemies over his lifetime. Many of them stronger, smarter, or more dangerous than Jella. But none of them had ever stared at John with the ferocity that the batarian woman was. Demanding to know whether the first human to ever show her kindness (and one of few people to ever show her kindness period) had just been using her.

"No, I did not lie to you then, and I will not lie now. We came here to end the Hegemony, not only because it is a threat to my people, but because it is an abomination that should have never been in the first place. We have no intention of leaving this conflict until the Hegemony and all those that support it, are dead and buried. And the Batarian people, can finally begin to redeem themselves for all that it has done." John replied firmly. Speaking more for himself, than ONI as a whole. Knowing that his initial motivation for Operation Spartacus had more to do with realpolitik than compassion.

Jella looked hard at John, as she mentally digested his words. Then she turned to Cara and embraced her. Whispering to the asari "meld with me now."

For once Cara did not verbally announce the beginning of a meld. Diving straight into Jella's mind as the batarian told what she had figured out. Knowing that Jella would only suggest this if she had something vital to tell the asari.

'We've got to keep working with the humans.'

'But they're just using us!' Cara mentally protested.

'I know...so let's use them...you've seen my memories you know the Hegemony is evil...we can't overthrow it without outside support...so we need them...besides maybe I'm being stupid but I think John is at least partially sincere...and-'

Jella's mental voice trail off, but Cara could see the rest of the thought.

'We know too much.' the asari finished for her.

'Exactly...if we tried to back out now they would just kill us and try to recruit somebody else to act as the face of the rebellion...but if I'm in charge I can still influence things and make sure that they can't use batarians as their obedient slave soldiers against the Citadel.' Jella explained.

When she sensed that Cara was still unhappy Jella continued 'please I need you with me on this...I need somebody I can trust around...please Cara.'

Cara T'Val was not stupid, but she was young, and Jella was first person she had ever been involved with. Lacking the experience or wisdom to truly understand what she was getting into as she replied 'of course Jella I will always be there for you.'

To those watching Cara and Jella only appeared to embrace for a moment, then they let go of each other. As Jella said "All right, we're still with you...but if you try to turn us into your obedient slave soldiers to use against the Citadel I will personally kill you all." and if passion and conviction alone were enough Jella could make good on the threat. But Spartan's didn't have a reputation as 'warrior-gods' without reason.

John simply nodded. "Understood." He was glad that they were still on his side, if only just. He may have worked hard to earn their trust, but he had to realize that Jella's own discontent with the Citadel races was the real reason why she was still willing to work with him. As for Cara, he suspected that she was just siding with Jella because she was young and in love. He just hoped that once this was over, assuming they all survived, the asari maiden wasn't too disillusioned. He had seen too many dead eyes among orphans during the Great War.

****APUFMKII****

Now that the rebels had received reinforcements and supplies they were prepared to make their boldest move yet. An action that would (if things proceeded according to plan) firmly establish Jella Korragan as the leader of the rebellion against the Batarian Hegemony. Turning the rebellion into something that Hegemony could not ignore or credibly deny.

John Doe was taking Cara T'Val, two of his fellow Spartans Kelly and Diego Piedra, the twenty rebels he trusted the most, and of course Jella herself on the mission. Cara was coming simply because Jella insisted, and Diego had been brought along due to fact that John wanted to see how the younger Spartan performed in combat before letting him do anything without supervision.

The mission itself was relatively straightforward. They were going to takeover a commercial broadcasting station, then use its facilities to publically announce the rebellion to everybody on the batarian homeworld. Leaving (hopefully) before the military or police could respond.

ONI knew that the Hegemony ruled to a large extent through fear. Predicting that the batarian people's fear of their government would start to fade away if they witnesses rebels openly challenging the government and getting away with it. Of course this was all built on the assumption that everything went according to plan.

John Doe knew that if the the mission failed (or they were caught shortly afterwards) the Hegemony would simply have more bloody examples to terrify the populace with.

And of course, as the German strategist once said, "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy."

Which was had happened the moment they had breached the doors to the broadcast station and made their way inside. Someone inside had hit the alarm and alerted the local precinct to the attack. Now that alone would not have been cause for concern. The Batarian state police, for all their swagger and bluster were undertrained, undergunned and cowards at their core (for the most part). Even their Heavy Response Squads or HRS, were the same compared to those of

human colonies. The rebels alone would have been enough to handle them.

No, the problem was that a small detachment of Hegemony military were reinforcing them. Unlike their civilian counterparts, they were an actual threat to the rebels. Having military grade weapons and armor, and the hardware to match. Like in the Vietnam war back in the twentieth century of Earth, in an open firefight, the rebels were at a major disadvantage.

Against the rebels they were an issue, against a Spartan however, it was no challenge. But that wasn't the problem. The problem was that with the military now having gotten involved, it meant two things. The first was that the Hegemony was now taking them seriously enough that they were using military forces to respond to any potential rebel alerts. The second being, that their timetable just got cut in half. Even if all of the responders were eliminated, a lack of response by the military contingent would mean more, and potentially heavier, reinforcements would be inbound.

Diego was of course unconcerned. Humming a dirty song to himself as he took out a batarian soldier with a precise headshot. Spraying several of his nearby comrades with blood in the process. Enjoying the fight like an enthusiastic athlete performing in a sporting event.

Cara T'Val was on the knife edge between terror and rage as she threw enemy soldiers around with her biotics. Gritting her teeth as she avoided enemy fire, desperately praying to the goddess that none of it would hit her. She had discarded with most of her barriers except to protect against flying shrapnel and small debris, instead focusing the majority of her power in dealing as much damage as she possibly could.

John Doe and Kelly fought with cold professionalism, dropping one enemy combatant after another with lethal precision. Kelly was a blur as she sprinted back and forth, dropping batarians before they could even realize she was there, and gone by the time she did. John was more methodical, letting his shields taking a beating as he peppered the more heavily armed and armored soldiers with his new XR3 Cerberus rifle, courtesy of ONI.

The weapon itself resembled a splice between the M392 Designated Marksman Rifle and the MA5-B in terms of trigger and body, but that was where the similarities ended. It used the Citadel race's method of scraping metal pellets from a larger block then accelerating them to supersonic, near hypersonic speeds. But unlike those weapons, which relied only on internal heatsinks and trigger discipline to moderate heat, this one had three barrels, stacked in a triangle shape. Only one was firing at any time, while the other two cooled, coupled with the Covenant's heatsink technology, meant that it could fire near indefinitely. With a firerate of 1000 rounds a second, and the Spartan's lethal aim, it turned whatever it set its sights on into so much shredded meat.

Jella and the rest of the rebels John had hand picked for the mission fought passionately. They quite literally hated the people they were fighting, their actions guided by rage as they shot at the soldiers. While it did wonders for their morale, in truth such over eagerness made them sloppy, and one of the rebel fighters was killed by

friendly fire (though in the confusion of battle virtually nobody noticed). More rounds missed than actually hit their targets, but the sheer volume of fire meant they did actually hit someone. Still, their relative inexperience meant that some were still cutdown. Of the original twenty, six had been killed, another two wounded and unable to fight.

Even as John was cutting down the enemy at a blistering rate, he managed to count the number of hostiles still fighting. Only about fifty or so, and most of their heavy hitters were down for the count. And this was a perfect defensive position, as the Rebels had more cover than their enemies did. He opened up a comm. channel. "Team B, we're done here. We're moving into the facility and going for the objective." Getting five affirmatives, he focused on the rest, "Kelly, you stay here and hold position with the others. Keep the door open." Kelly's symbol flashed green on his HUD, saying that she understood. Followed by three yellow flashes, the Spartan signal for 'hurry up'.

Mowing down another batarian, John ordered, "Team B, move out." Cara, Jella, Piedra and three other rebels whose name he couldn't recall left their cover and began to move deeper inside. One of the rebels turned his back to the enemy to run, only to be shot down. None of them spared the fallen a second glance as they ran for the broadcast room deeper inside. They had little trouble taking out the security guards, John and Piedra taking them out before any could even fire their pistols.

The technicians in the recording studio stared in horror as their guards were shot down. The local celebrity who had been in the process of making his news show (i.e. more Hegemony propaganda) tried to flee. Only to be shot down by Piedra.

"I want a live broadcast with the strongest signal you got" Jella told the two technicians.

"BUT WE'RE NOT ALLOWED TO DO THAT!" one of the techs hysterically protested, only to be shot down by Jella for his outburst.

"Are you gonna tell me what you can't do too?" Jella asked the surviving technician.

"No..no ma'am" the male whimpered. Moving to set up the live broadcast that Jella wanted. All too aware of the weapons pointed at his body in case he made one wrong move.

"We're...we're Live" the technician announced. Hoping that rebels wouldn't simply kill him at this point, and that no one noticed the damp spot on the front of his pants. Shuddering as the rebel leader glowered at him before beginning to speak.

"People of the Batarian Hegemony...I am Jella Korragan leader of the rebellion against our tyrannical government."

Jella was not a natural orator, but she had thought long and hard about what she was going to say during this moment. Wanting to inspire her fellow slaves and terrify (or at least intimidate) their masters. Moreover, despite her other faults Jella was nothing if not sincere. Which came across as she continued her speech.

"For generations the MASTERS of the Hegemony have gotten fat off our work while raping, torturing, and murdering us, thinking that they were untouchable...but they're wrong."

"My master Goroth Talang abused me in every way imaginable until I couldn't stand it anymore...most slaves in my position would have ended their own lives but instead I took his...killing the motherless bastard with the same whip his liked to use me...now me and mine will kill ALL the masters in the Hegemony."

As Jella remembered killing her master a beatific smile crossed her face. Contemplating the death of all the slave masters in the Hegemony. Keeping that vision in mind as she continued. John made a motion from behind the camera to wrap it up.

"The Hegemony is evil, corrupt, and its end is coming soon...to all my fellow slaves I say join me and seize your own destiny...and to all the MASTERS throughout the Hegemony I say this...free your slaves or we'll come for you too" Jella finished, practically growling the final words.

"All right...everybody on the planet who's got a receiver on should have picked that up" the technician explained as he realized Jella was done speaking. Thinking about how much trouble he would be in once his role in this fiasco (from the Hegemony's perspective) was discovered. Hoping he could alter the records so it looked like the dead technician had been the one to cooperate, before more government troops showed up.

"Do you own any slaves?" Jella asked as she looked at the surviving technician's fancy uniform.

"N...no" the man replied in terror, his insincerity obvious even to Diego.

Jella responded by blowing the man's head open. Then addressing the corpse "did you think I was lying when I said that I was going to kill ALL the slave masters."

John Doe felt a chill as he witnessed the casual murder. As he realized just what kind of bloodbath Jella really wanted. Moreover, it was too late to discard the bloodthirsty batarian now, they had just announced the Rebellion to the entire world with her as its face. ONI needed to be informed, or this Operation would end only as a slaughter, instead of a revolution.

"Did you get all the surveillance equipment before we started the broadcast?" John Doe asked Diego as they fled the scene. Having assigned the younger Spartan the job because his armor was newer (and therefore had better sensors).

"Of course boss" Diego said confidently. But in truth the arrogant young super soldier had forgotten in all the excitement. Still Piedra doubted that it would matter. After all, he was a Spartan, why should he care about being seen? The Spartan thought to himself, not knowing what would come of his actions.

Please, review and let me know what you think, liked, disliked and suggestions.

20. Fragile Peace: Advent of Shadows

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk. II

Co-written with aDarkOne.

Please read both Author's Notes at the bottom of the chapter. One by me, the other by my cowriter.

Chapter 20

Fragile Peace: Advent of Shadows

The batarian ambassador to the Citadel had requested a meeting with the Council, claiming that he had urgent news for them. None of the Councilors liked Jath'Amon, because while he often acted pleasant and agreeable (at least in his official capacity as ambassador), experience had shown him to be untrustworthy, self-serving, and arrogant (much like the government that he served). Nevertheless, it remained their job to deal with the representatives of the Associate Races. Besides, Jath'Amon requesting a meeting was unusual enough to warrant special attention.

"What do you think the bastard wants?" Wrex asked Tevos as the Councilors waited in the Audience Chamber for the ambassador to arrive.

"It is difficult to say." Tevos replied diplomatically.

"Aethyta is right." Wrex said with a chuckle.

"What are you talking about?" the asari matriarch replied with the merest hint of irritation in her voice.

"That you'd rather do nothing, than risk doing the WRONG thing." The battlemaster answered with a shrug.

"There is nothing wrong with being patient and prudent." Tevos said defensively.

"Sure...most of the time. But in a crisis, sometimes you have to just pick a choice, hope for the best, and carry through." Wrex replied with shrug of his massive shoulders.

"Perhaps, but we shouldn't treat everything like a crisis." Tevos countered.

"When hasn't it been a crisis since the damn humans showed up?" Wrex asked, a question to which Tevos had no ready answer.

The tension was broken by one of the Citadel Council's guards announcing that the ambassador was waiting just outside the Audience Chamber.

"Let him in." Councilor Cicero imperiously ordered.

As befitting his station, ambassador Jath'Amon wore the fanciest batarian finery, though the Councilors all thought the outfit ridiculously gaudy. His body husky (due to a lifetime of self

indulgence) and movements confident as he strode into the Audience Chamber. Deliberately meeting the eyes of Wrex, Tevos, Cicero, and Vald'n as he entered the large room.

None of the Councilors had good feelings about this meeting, as the Batarians rarely, if ever, called for a meeting of their own accord. The smug, and simultaneously angered look on the ambassador's face further reinforced that feeling.

"Honored Councilors I come with the gravest of news...treacherous outsiders are interfering in our affairs putting all the peoples of the Citadel at risk." The ambassador began once he knew that he had everyone's attention.

"Who are these outsiders?" Tevos asked, though she feared she already knew.

Jath'Amon fulfilled those those fears with one word. The last word that the asari Councilor wanted to hear right then.

"Humans...humans are committing acts of terrorism inside the Hegemony robbing, mutilating, and murdering everyone they can in a treacherous attempt to undermine the government and install a puppet state under their control." The ambassador said passionately. His disgust for the rebels and their aims genuine.

"Do you have proof of this?" the salarian Councilor asked coldly.

"Of course. I wouldn't dream of wasting the Council's time on mere rumors." Jath'Amon replied with a smile. With a tap of his omnitool, the projectors in the chamber activated, generating a massive screen for everyone to see.

At first, it showed nothing but static and white noise then, it began to clear up. Despite the poor quality, it was obvious that the video came from a soldier's helmet camera. Standard protocol to discourage soldiers from any war crimes and proof to either vindicate or prosecute them as needed.

The video shook as the batarian fired his rifle at a group of armed civilians. "Before you ask, no they are not civilians, they are terrorists. Those who have tossed in their lot with the humans and now fight against us." The ambassador explained, answering the unspoken question.

Many of the rebels simply ducked down when shots came too close for comfort. The soldier themselves not managing to bring any of them down. "Move in! Don't let them breathe!" The cam-soldier ordered, waving his troops forward, turning away from the battle for a split second. Turning back, the video shook hard then panned upwards as the soldier was shot and killed, showing the Khar'Shan sky and other troops walking past his body.

Before anyone could question the ambassador, he tapped his omnitool again. The video reversed, then paused just as the cam had finished turning back to the battle. "My first, though admittedly not conclusive piece of evidence." Focusing on a single figure, the video zoomed in, cleaning up the pixelated image as best as possible.

"No." Valdn breathed as they all saw a blurry but unmistakable image of a Spartan, just like the ones that had assaulted and kidnapped the salarian (along with the other Councilors) himself. Wrex cursed at the sight, but Tevos merely stared in horror.

Remembering how helpless and terrified she had felt as the massive armored alien warriors had taken her prisoner and then proceeded to fight their way off the Citadel. C-Sec and even the Citadel Defense Fleet unable to stop them as the humans carried off the Council. The Destiny Ascension itself (pride of the Asari Republics and until then the most powerful warship in known space) brushed aside (and crippled) with contemptuous ease as the humans made their escape.

Unlike the others Cicero had not been a Councilor at the time. He had not even been on the Citadel. Instead he had been an admiral commanding one of the Hierarchy's fleets. During the war with the UNSC Cicero's fleet had managed to ambush and destroy a small patrol of human warships scouting the system his fleet was already in.

In truth the battle had been little more than a skirmish during the war, and had no real impact on the overall conflict between the Council Races and humanity. But it was one of the few real victories the Hierarchy had against the UNSC (especially in space) so Cicero had been hailed as a hero afterwards. Using his newfound fame as a 'war hero' as leverage to get a seat on the Council itself. But in his heart Cicero knew that his 'victory' had meant nothing in the overall scheme of things, and it made him hate the humans all the more. A fact that he had learned after the sacking of Impera and the scale of the UNSC armada was made known to him.

Before anything could be said, Saren made his presence known. "Councilors, before we beginning jumping to conclusions and begin blaming the UNSC, I must protest against this so-called proof." Looks of shock and anger were directed at his person but he shrugged them off. "I do not say this because I am trying to defend the humans, but I would prefer not to fight a war on false-assumptions. Yes, that appears to be one of those that abducted you at our first encounter, but it could also be an asari, or even a batarian, wearing armor that could give the appearance of those humans, for reasons known only to them. The quality of the video is shoddy at worst, and a blur at best."

"The Hegemony has nothing to hide examine the recording all you like, but first Councilors observe the rest of it." the batarian ambassador said, his uncharacteristic reasonableness throwing even Saren a little off guard. The batarian ambassador was known for being defensive, challenging, and combative in the political arena. The fact that he was capitulating without any real fight or argument did not bode well in the slightest.

The scene they were watching shifted to another room, as a batarian female gunned down a male whose uniform showed that he was a technician 2nd Class. The female (who identified herself as Jella Korrigan) proceeded to give a passionate speech against the Hegemony. Echoing sentiments that a lot of the Councilors secretly (or not so secretly in Wrex's case) shared.

"Now here's the important part." Jath'Amon said as one of the figures

that looked like a Spartan took his helmet off to clean the blood off his golden visor. Giving all the Councilors a clear image of his face. Revealing the fair skin, heavy brows, and sullen expression of what was obviously a human male. The man immediately putting his helmet back after he had wiped the blood off.

"That looks nothing like an asari to me and even less like a batarian." the ambassador added arrogantly as they all took in the sight. This here was irrefutable proof that the humans were involved, and almost without a doubt, the UNSC/UEG itself as well. It was one thing for a human to be part of this terrorist group, but one of their elites? That was something else.

"I promise you Jath'Amon, that this outrage against an Associate Race will not go unanswered. We ****will**** make the humans answer for what they have done." Cicero said passionately.

The other Councilors stared at Cicero in shock. The sheer arrogance of him speaking for the entire Council this way was disturbing. Moreover, even IF they all agreed with his course of action, the Citadel Council's ability to get the humans to do anything was seriously in doubt. Yet with a single statement, Cicero had all but dedicated them to the course of action. He had left them unable to do anything but publically support both Cicero and the Batarian Hegemony, whatever their personal feelings may have been. Seeing as the only other option was to go against Cicero and publically appear to be a supporter of the humans, which would have been political suicide.

"I knew our faith in the Council was not misplaced." the ambassador replied happily, and only somewhat insincerely. Having learned years ago the most expedient ways to use Citadel politics to his government's benefit.

"But FIRST, we will see what the humans have to say for themselves." Tevos stated with uncharacteristic steel in her voice.

"Yeah. We should at least talk to the motherless varren before doing anything crazy." Wrex added.

Both the turian Councilor and batarian ambassador turned to Vald'n at that point. Hoping to find some support for immediate action with the last Councilor. But Vald'n simply said "Gathering further data WOULD be prudent."

Biting back a scathing comment, the batarian ambassador simply put on a fake smile. "Very well then. Let us hear what the human's make of this. We would not to wage a full-scale war over a misunderstanding or mistaken identity."

****APUFMKII****

Back on Jarum, in the UNSC/UEG consulate in New Ozai, things had gone to hell in a handbasket, to say the least. When word spread that Bluestone had been violently spirited away by what appeared to be UNSC troops, open rioting broke out. The consulate had publicly advised all humans to stay indoors, while consul personnel had quietly spread the message that those who could, should go off-world until things calmed down.

When Denton heard the first gunshots, his first thought was, "Oh great, another idiot trying to climb the walls." Until more cracks of gunfire started sounding out, first single shots, and now it was a constant cacophony of burst fire. Having still been inside the meeting room, he bolted from his chair and out of the room, trying to find someone with a radio. Grabbing the first trooper he found, he ordered, "Status report! Now!"

The trooper, scared out of his wits being both a greenhorn and seeing one of the heroes of humanity snapped off a salute. "Sir! Something's going on with the crowd outside! They're trying to enter the compound!"

"What bloody hell for! What in Reach just happened!?" Denton ordered, all but shaking the trooper with a strength unexpected of the doctor.

Instead of answering, the trooper just pointed to one of the many screens in the consulate on the wall, an asari news reporter with what looked like a scene out of the First Insurrection in the background.

"As you can see here, the convoy of police that was to be escorting the human Bluestone to the New Ozai courthouse has been ambushed. Almost the entire convoy was destroyed, and all those guarding it killed. The images are incredibly graphic so younger and more sensitive viewers are encouraged to look away." The camera then panned away from the asari to observe the carnage that had been left behind. The remains of vehicles and bodies alike, shattered and ripped apart. Many of the bodies were covered by blue tarps or in black bags, those that were largely intact that is. Some were in pieces, with limbs and other pieces scattered around where they died. "Thankfully, some have survived the carnage and are been taken to the hospital for immediate medical attention." Again the camera panned to show some officers being placed onto stretchers, medical aid being applied as they were moved into ambulances. Though they were far outnumbered by the dead.

One of the officers saw the news crew and started waving to them to come over. "Hold on, it looks like one of them is waving us over, perhaps we can get more information." The feed shook as the camera hovered over, following the news reporter. "Can you tell us what happened here?"

"It was the humans..UNSC troops..they pretended that they were helping us guard Bluestone but as soon as everybody was in the tunnel they turned on us" the police officer said hoarsely. Clutching her chest where the armor was splattered red, and a dash of blue.

"Are you sure it was the UNSC? Could it not have been some faction not associated with the UNSC?"

"May the spirits and ancestors condemn my soul if I am wrong, but those fucks had their armor, had their weapons! And no, it wasn't that green shit that everyone could make in their grandma's house, it was that black gear. It was them." The officer coughed, hacking up a bit of blood. "You don't believe me, check the cams. One of them had bars stamped to their armor." The officer started hacking again, wheezing as they tried to breathe.

One of the EMTs came up, a krogan, and pushed her away. "Stand aside, we're getting them out of here, now." The krogan lifted up the stretcher with ease but gently, placing it inside the medical truck. Stepping inside, he slapped the walls of the truck. "Lets get moving!" He shouted, before slamming the doors close and it sped off, leaving the news reporter and her camera behind.

"Did we do it, sir?"

Doctor Denton turned around to find himself addressed by one of the consulate personnel. A good natured young woman who normally worked as the receptionist in the main lobby. As he looked at her, Denton realized that she was addressing him as a member of the Office of Naval Intelligence.

"Why are you asking me?"

"Well because you're one of...them." the woman admitted nervously.

Denton held back a sigh, it seemed that no matter where he went, the stigma that came with being a part of ONI was always following him, even on an out of the place like Jarum. "No, far as I know, it wasn't us."

'If it is, I am going to _TEAR _that _**BITCH**_ a new one!' He thought to himself.

"Then who did?" She asked earnestly. No one answered as no one did have an answer.

The tense moment was broken as Consul Xanatos walked into the room. Approaching Doctor Denton with a message in his hand. Giving it to Denton as he told the ambassador "we just received this from HighCom, sir. Priority Alpha."

Denton grabbed the message, reading the scant few lines on it. Priority Alpha was code for "Read now, postpone everything else", for when something required immediate attention but wasn't something as important as say a declaration of war. The only words on the paper were, "Return to the Fortress. Alpha priority. Rome has been made aware." Denton's eyes grew wide at the last sentence.

"Damn it all, what the hell is going on?" He muttered. Turning back to Xanatos he'd ordered, "I'm taking command now, under ONI authority. Get all non-combatants to the dropships and get them off-planet now. Keep only the medical personnel next to the troops. Have all combat ready troops get ready for evacuation and load up on TTRs and LTL weapons."

"Sir?" Xanatos asked, "Why evacuate? Won't that make us look guilty?"

"Only if we evacuated the human civilians from here. Right now they're all focused on us. And right now, I'd rather not risk anyone getting hurt. Besides, from the looks of it, it only looks like there's what, a dozen at best non-fighters here?"

"Well I think Tiala spent the night again." the woman Denton had been talking to a moment ago said, referring to Xanatos's asari

girlfriend. Earning a venomous look from her boss, the consul.

"Then get her off planet if you, and more importantly, she, wants to. If she wants to stay, you can stay. I just want to make sure that few people as possible are at risk." Turning to those that had come with him, "That goes for you as well. I expect you on the next transport off-world." His aids nodded, with the exception of Serana, who was staring at a message on her omnitool. "Serana, what's wrong?"

"A message from High Charity. They...all New Covenant citizens are to return and make way to the Holy City by the fastest means possible. Under the Arbiter's decree to all citizens." It was clear how much the message disturbed Serana, but no one understood why. The New Covenant had a standing agreement with the UNSC/UEG that they could order all of its citizens to return to Covenant space at a moment's notice, with all then standing contracts and agreements, if not nullified, then postponed until they could leave Covenant space again.

****APUFMKII****

Derek Hardison got up slowly as his alarm went off. Looking around his apartment as he awoke. Stretching out as he got out of bed and gazed at his possessions.

Things were looking up for Hardison. He had a new much nicer apartment, new furniture, and new vehicles. He was important and praised again (albeit behind closed doors). And all it took to reach this new state of affairs was a deal with the mysterious group that Olivia Miller represented.

After decades of total war, the UNSC and EUG had more military hardware than they knew what to do with. Moreover, as an administrator at a UNSC Reach R&D facility Hardison had access to a great deal of that equipment.

All he needed to do was requisition the transfer of a few companies worth of equipment from anywhere from a few dozen or a few hundred warehouses and storage facilities to certain locations. Then, while in transit, he simply struck them from the manifests, and relabelled them as some other material, and arriving as innocuous as a crate of scrap metal to be recycled. Since he was pilfering from surplus supplies, no one was really watching them closely. Well, no Smart-class AI that would have caught onto his tricks at any rate. With the CDF and private security firms moving so much materials anyways, that made his job even easier as all he had to do was make a few crates 'disappear' and some incorrectly placed ones, 'appear' as it were. The sheer volume that was being moved meant that no one would notice when a half dozen mislabeled crates were found among a few hundred or even a few thousand.

At least that was the layman's way of explaining it, the actual process itself was obviously much more complex.

As he approached the windows, the blinds opened up, presenting to him the gleaming skylines and towers of New Alexandria. Before, owning an apartment such as this would have been well out of his reach, pun not intended, unless his Project Eezo had succeeded. But the payments from Ms. Miller's hidden benefactors meant that it was well within his grasp.

The trickiest part of all these deals had not been covering his tracks, no he felt more than comfortable in his ability to do so, having spent the better part of six months learning all he could about how the UNSC/UEG tracked and kept count of all it's supplies and materials, and more importantly, where all the holes were, before he even considered making his first deal. No, the most problematic of these had been concealing all of his newly found wealth. At first it had been easy, being mostly untraceable credit chips that he could use at his leisure and hide at whim. Then, with more transactions, it became an unfeasible option. Simply hiding all his new found wealth in his home was no longer plausible.

So instead there was a bank account, held under another name, where the majority of his ill-gotten gains were being sent, that only he and Miller's benefactor's had access to. Which was at his beck and call at a moment's notice.

His private terminal, with all the trimmings and modifications necessary to make it a 'ghost' platform, one that, for all intents and purposes, technically didn't exist on the network, signalled a message had arrived. Opening it, it simply read: "We are highly pleased. The remainder of the transaction has been wired to the account provided. We look forward to doing business with you again."

Hardison was not sure whether as to smile or frown at the message. It regarded his latest, and perhaps most dangerous, deal that he had made so far. And this one had caused him so much stress that it felt like it had taken several years off his life. The shipment itself had been several crates of weapons, ODS Battle Dress Uniforms and a M12 LRV, and the ammo to go with it all.

The Warthog, weapons and ammo had been easy. What was one vehicle among literal millions? What was a few rifles among billions, if not trillions? And ammunition? There were literally warehouses packed to the brim, safely of course, of the stuff. What had taken years off his life had been the ODS gear, and shipping it all.

ODS armor was watched (relatively) carefully, as it was the best armor the UNSC could mass produce. Contrary to popular belief, the MJOLNIR GEN-II armor was not easily produced, as a single suit cost enough to make a few hundred or so ODS BDUs. He shuddered at just how many close calls he had making so much of it disappear, scarcely believing having pulled it off at all. Indeed, he was wondering if this latest deal would be unseen as all the others had been.

But as though summoned by his doubts, Olivia Miller entered the room. She hadn't bothered to put on any clothes since their romantic evening last night. The blonde's voluptuous form somewhat obscured in the dim lighting of the apartment. Pressing her heavy breasts to the back of his head as she murmured "come back to bed darling."

The feel and sight of Olivia's body was enough to drive all other thoughts from Derek Hardison's mind. Oblivious to the calculating look that briefly crossed the Insurrectionist's face. As she debated whether the administrator was still an asset, or had become a (disposable) liability.

****APUFMKII****

Anita Goyle had always wanted to make history, so when she was appointed the first ambassador to the Citadel she was overjoyed. But over the last three years she had come to hate the Citadel and her job. Probably because the people of the Citadel made little effort to hide the fact that they hated her and the government, and for that matter the species, that she represented.

In retrospect, when she would look back on this, the situation seemed obvious. Not only had the UNSC attacked the Citadel during what were supposed to be negotiations, but the human forces had also kidnapped the Councilors, who were the most powerful people in the galaxy as far as the people of the Citadel were concerned, fought their way through the Presidium, for them, the most exclusive and well guarded neighborhood in all of Citadel space, after the home systems. And then proceeded to maul the Citadel Defense Fleet, which was then considered the most powerful fleet of warships in known space by the natives.

In the aftermath of all that, hundreds of soldiers and police officers stationed on or near the Citadel had been severely wounded or killed, and hundreds of civilians, many of them from the creme of Citadel society, had been killed, wounded, or rendered homeless as a result of the heavy fighting during the humans escape. To top it all off, the imprisoned Citadel Council had been forced to accept a humiliating treaty after one of their homeworlds had been attacked and another of their worlds had been destroyed.

The average citizen of the Citadel saw humans as vicious monsters only one step away from committing another atrocity. Few humans were permitted on the Citadel at all (the minimum required by the treaty that Doctor Denton had made the Council sign), and those that were, were all heavily monitored and shadowed by police, soldiers, and other government forces whenever they left the building that functioned as the UEG embassy on the Citadel.

That being said, she was being escorted by a squad of ODSs to her meeting with the Council. Normally it would have been just a squad of regular marines, but recently HIGHCOM on Reach had upped their security protocols. Something recently had stirred up the nest back home, enough that it reached more than a way's up the food chain. Anita had a bad feeling about this meeting.

'They never want to talk to me...not unless something has gone wrong that they blame me and the UEG for anyway...what has happened?' Anita wondered as she was escorted to the Council.

As she walked through the Presidium Anita saw many civilians stop and stare at her. None of the looks were friendly, and a few actually made obscene gestures in her direction. When she was first arrived on the Citadel Goyle would have reacted to such rudeness, but at this point she was sadly used to it. At least none of them attacked her, as had a few lunatics who had lost friends and family to the UNSC, only to be brutally put down by her human guards or the Citadel's own security forces (who feared humanity's retaliation should she be killed). Regardless of what the rest of Citadel space thought, here on the Citadel itself the UNSC was regarded as an enemy nation, and its representative would always be merely tolerated at best.

'Even more guards!...what do they think I'm going to do...try to kill

and eat the Councilors if they get too close?' Anita thought as she was escorted into the Audience Chamber to meet with the Council, seeing that security there had once again been upgraded. It seemed that with every meeting, the number of C-Sec, Spectres and PMCs present doubled. As though they were expecting war to erupt at any moment.

As she finally arrived at the main chamber, the pit in her stomach seemed to grow fivefold at the sight of the Batarian ambassador. Since their arrival on the galactic scene, the human nation and the Hegemony almost immediately started butting heads. Due to the fact that the UNSC had claimed territory near the Hegemony that in many cases the batarians were planning on colonizing (or at least exploring in search of natural resources).

But as far as Anita knew it hadn't gotten any further than angry words and diplomatic posturing. The Hegemony knew that it didn't stand a chance against the UNSC in a real war, and the UNSC had no desire to fight another war when it still hadn't fully recovered from its war with the Covenant.

The batarian ambassador wasted no time on pleasantries. Sincerely hoping to catch the human diplomat by surprise (and perhaps get an honest answer) as he demanded to know "why is humanity sponsoring terrorism in the Hegemony?" When Anita didn't answer, the ambassador smirked, "Well human? Why is your government sponsoring acts of terrorism within our sovereign territory?"

Anita was, for lack of a better word, stunned. Whatever she had expected, all the scenarios she had considered, an accusation of that magnitude was most definitely **not **one of them. Trying to recover and buy herself time she asked, "I'm sorry, could you repeat that? I believe that my translator is broken. It sounded as though you said my government was sponsoring a terrorist organization in the Hegemony of all places?"

Jath'Amon crossed his arms in confidence, "No, you heard me correctly human. Your government is directly assisting a terrorist organization within the Hegemony. An organization that has caused the deaths of thousands." Amon was fudging the numbers by several hundred, but it wasn't as though anyone else in the room knew that.

"Was it not enough that you destroyed Impera and cowed us, but now you want to tear us apart from the inside?"

"The UEG does not support terrorism." Anita Goyle said firmly, but in truth even she didn't believe the words. At this point it was an open secret that ONI had been conducting a covert campaign to weaken the New Covenant through sabotage, assassination, and manipulation. But as far as she knew her government hadn't done anything similar to the Council or Associate Races. Still, she liked to believe that her government would spit at the idea of supporting an actual terrorist group, considering everything they had faced against both the First and the Second Insurrection.

Turning the Councilors, she addressed them "Honored Council, are you going to allow this liar to make such baseless and slanderous accusations against my government? Where is the proof, where is the evidence to these claims?" Anita all but demanded.

At this point Anita Goyle wasn't especially fond of any of the Councilors. But her least favorite was easily Cicero. The turian Councilor had never made much effort to hide his utter hatred of humanity from her. So he was the last one she wanted to hear from, as he turned to her and said, "So...you deny all of the charges?"

Cicero's expression made Anita feel as though she was walking into a trap. Nevertheless, she knew what her position demanded of her, so she replied, "Of course! And unless he can provide proof I demand a formal apology from the ambassador and his government."

An apology would cost the batarian regime nothing. But Anita knew that issuing a formal apology would embarrass the Hegemony and hurt the batarian leaders pride. So she hoped it would make Jath'Amon back off. Instead he merely leered and said with false politeness, "As you wish."

As if on cue, the videos that Jath'Amon had shown the Council before, was projected again. Anita staring in horror as she watched footage of Spartans aiding batarian rebels in slaughtering government forces. Gazing in disbelief as one Spartan foolishly took off his helmet in enemy territory. The scene ending with the rebel leader gunning down a helpless batarian technician.

"Bohrak Kanran was merely doing his job at broadcasting station alpha four...he was known at work for being punctual and detail oriented...he had five children and a loving wife...and now his wife is a widow and his children are fatherless...unfortunately Bohrak is just one of many killed by these terrorist dogs and their HUMAN allies." the batarian ambassador venomously explained.

Anita just stared at Jath'Amon in horror for a moment. While it was possible the video was fake, something in her gut told her it wasn't. Besides, this kind of operation fit ONI's M.O. all too perfectly. But she knew that she could never admit as much. If the UNSC admitted to doing this it could easily lead to all out war. Something her bosses desperately didn't want while the New Covenant was still strong enough to be a threat. Besides, Anita suspected that if she admitted that ONI might have done it, her superiors would simply call her crazy and have her replaced.

With a conviction that did not reflect the trepidation she felt, Anita shot back, "Do you really expect me to believe this farce? This fabrication in an attempt to implicate my government for something that they had no hand in?"

"So any humans within Hegemony territory trying to overthrow the government and commit acts of terror are not supported by the UNSC or the EUG?" Cicero coldly demanded of her.

'They're probably ONI attack dogs.' Anita thought. She like most UEG citizens had no love for the covert ops group. But aloud she replied, "Of course not."

"Then they are criminals by both your standards and ours?" Cicero continued as he stared intently at the human ambassador. His gaze weighing on her like a physical thing. The turian's expression reminding Anita that his ancestors had been predators that had killed with tooth and claw.

Anita swallowed in response. For all her training and experience, this was something beyond her. Right now, she was standing at the precipice that could determine if the UNSC would again be in a state of total war against a coalition of alien way she saw it, she had only one real option: to agree with Cicero and decry all humans found in Hegemony space as those independent of the UNSC and cut all ties with them. If she tried to argue that there was something else going on, then Cicero would likely claim the human presence as a prelude to an act of war. If she tried to ask for more time, even to simply contact her superiors, chances were that someone would use her request against her, claiming that humanity was trying to cover up their actions, and act without her being able to interfere.

'May God forgive me for what I am about to do. Especially if there really are Spartans over there.' She prayed to herself.

"Any humans trying to overthrow the Hegemony or found committing acts of terrorism within its territory does so against the wishes of my government. Those found within the borders of the Batarian Hegemony will be considered criminals by my government and should be treated as such."

"Good...because I talked to the Primarch before this meeting. And he's agreed to send a Hierarchy fleet and its accompanying army to help the Hegemony to eliminate these terrorists. And I would _so_ hate to cause a diplomatic incident." Cicero replied, the words delivered like a threat. Unseen by Cicero, each of his fellow Councillors shot their turian counterpart a look that promised that they would speak of this later. Not realizing the trouble he was already in with his peers, Cicero continued, "The Batarian Hegemony is an Associate Race and as such the Council will not permit ANY outsiders to violate its sovereignty."

Anita Goyle shuddered as the implications of the words hit her. Meanwhile the other Councilors were openly glaring at Cicero at this point. But the turian was oblivious as he enjoyed his moment of victory over the human, unaware of just how far he had stepped out of line.

****APUFMKII****

"Soâ€¦let me get this right." Terrence didn't break his gaze from Margaret as he poured two fingers worth of a high grade scotch into two glasses. "You're telling me, that you've had outposts and listening stations with the Arbiter's territory, conducting acts of both espionage and sabotage against his people, since the end of the Great War." He pulled back the bottle, capping it as he set it back on the desk. "And now they've started fighting back?" He took one of the glasses, nudging the other Paragon'sky.

"Not quite so simply, but yes." Margaret answered, taking the proffered drink. "You should have known Terrence, that it was always the case. We couldn't let them gather the strength to become a threat to us again, not after what they've done." She added, letting go of all pretenses. The two were in Terrence Hood's private office, which was also the prototype version of _Odin's Eye _on the _Point of No Return. _The two were old colleagues, and almost equal in rank, so the usual show of respect and pomp were discarded, especially since they were alone. Even Margaret's usually constant shadow, Osmin, was

absent.

She took a sip of the scotch. "Very good, Terrence. Martian, 2500, correct?" Hood nodded, taking a sip of his own, as she put hers back down. "But that is hardly an issue, humanity has been doing such since the First Cold War, back in the 1950s. If anything, this is considerably more ethical."

"Ethical, is that what you people think of it now?" Hood asked in disgust. "By god, Margaret, just what are you trying to do? Are you trying to start another war?" Slamming his fist on his desk. "Our military is still recovering from the Great War, let alone the Heretic Wars! If you recall, we lost over ninety percent of our navy alone between those two, and since then, we've only brought up our numbers to seventy percent of the our peak during the Great War. And you said yourself that the people are not in any state of mind to accept another war."

The ONI Section III Director didn't even flinch at Lord Hood's anger. "Yes, which was precisely the reason _why,_ " stressing the word, "that these operations were carried out in the first place. To make sure that they would be far too focused on saving themselves, than to even consider fighting us again."

"Well it seems on that, you both somehow managed to succeed and fail spectacularly." He said, referring to the topic they had just discussed earlier. Of how the New Covenant, or Neo-Covenant as some had recently begun referring to it, had managed to utilize the Citadel Race's Mass Effect-based FTL, and adapt it to their fighters. Then of course, the subsequent destruction of three of ONI's covert operations/listening stations within Covenant territory. "Now they've got a weapon that we can't defend against, or least not properly. Not to mention the assets and personnel lost in these attacks. One that we," referring to the UNSC/UEG as a whole, "can not do anything about, as these stations were supposed to not exist in the first place."

"For now, Terrence, for now." She chided, "We will find a countermeasure. For every problem, there is a solution."

"And what is your solution to the loss of humanity's only potential ally in the galaxy?" Hood asked coldly, wondering if the head of ONI really couldn't see it.

"There are plenty of other powers in the galaxy that-" Parangosky started to argue, only to be interrupted by the admiral.

"Are too weak to make a difference...if the turians or somebody else choose to wage all-out war, the ONLY ones strong and interested enough to interfere would be the Covenant Races except now THANKS TO YOU they hate us again too." Hood thundered as he glared ferociously at Parangosky. "Should we go to war with the Covenant, it will be like the Great War again, despite all that we've achieved. A fighting retreat. If the Citadel races fought alongside us, it would make little difference."

Admiral Parangosky stared at Hood in disbelief. She was not used to be spoken to so disrespectfully (even Denton was didn't dare to be so rude). She was almost universally feared anywhere she went. But Lord Hood was perhaps the only man who could get away with it.

He was probably the only person within human territory with more real power than the head of ONI. Moreover, unlike Parangosky, Hood was publically lionized for his actions, both during and after the Great War. More so the latter, as he actually began returning power to the UEG, rather than hoarding it like some despotic dictator. In short, he had the whole of humanity supporting him.

"Now, I want you to cease all activities in Covenant space. Pull back everyone, and I _meaneveryone. _No sleeper cells, no dead drops, nothing. And I want ****ALL**** records on everything." He downed the last of the scotch before placing the glass in his desk. "Thereafter, I'll be arranging a meeting with the Arbiter. If luck favors us, then he'll see this as an act of good faith. Be prepared to lose some of your agents, Sangheili honor will demand nothing less."

Parangosky openly frowned, "Of course, Terrence." Internally however, she was pleased. She already knew this would be the case, after all. The operations had already since been postponed or cancelled entirely, it would be a simple matter of doctoring the reports to make it appear as needed to appease the Fleet Admiral. As for the agents, well, acceptable losses.

Such pleasantries thoughts were interrupted by one of Parangosky's aids entering the room. Urgently demanding the admiral's attention. Despite her clear orders to be left alone during her meeting with Hood unless it was an emergency.

Before she could say the word, the agent blurted, "Apologies Admirals. I understand that you gave explicit orders that you were not to be disturbed unless it was dire and...well...You better take a look at this sirs." The agent handed over two datapads, which Parangosky and Hood immediately began reading. "We just got the information sir. ID codes confirm as Anita Goyle's."

As Margaret read ambassador Goyle's report, which covered her meeting with the Citadel Council and batarian ambassador in detail, a feeling of dread settled in her stomach. Ideally the Council and Lord Hood would have never found out about ONI involvement in the slave rebellion, or at least not until long after the fact. But of all the ways for Hood, probably the only man inside the UNSC with both the power and the will to bring her down, to find out, this was the worst.

"Thank you, agent." Hood's voice was eerily calm and collected as he said this. "You're dismissed." Seeing the situation for what it was, the agent snapped off a quick salute and 'yes sir' before all but running from the office. "Now then, just when were you planning on tell me of this, Director?"

The truth was 'never' but even in her shocked state Parangosky was too smart to say that. Instead saying in placid tones, "When the time was right."

With a huff, he retorted, "And when would that have been? When this operation of yours was a done deal? Or after we were at war with the Citadel Council?"

"Neither, but it is a moot point, all things considered."

"All things consideredâ€¦" Hood parroted. "All things considered you have turned humanity's most powerful ally against us...perhaps forever. And seem intent on making the only other superpower in the galaxy hate us too. I have half a mind to execute you here and purge Section III. God knows that nobody would object. Hell, if anything, people would praise me for it. Your people have been allowed to work without oversight for too long. _Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?_"

The head of ONI shuddered at the words. For all its power, ONI's strength was in assassination and subterfuge. In an all out war, they wouldn't stand a chance against the human military. Moreover, Hood was right about one thing. ONI was almost universally feared but it was also almost universally hated too. If the UNSC proper turned against ONI, the public in the UEG territory would gladly join in. Parangosky and her people would be hunted everywhere, and under those conditions the admiral suspected that most of her own people would happily betray her for an offer of leniency.

"If you purge Section III, that would cripple ONI, and would leave humanity vulnerable to groups like the Insurrectionists Remnants and the STG at least until you created a decent replacement, which would probably take years." Parangosky explained, doing an admirable job of hiding her fear.

"I know...which is why I hope you won't drive me to it." Lord Hood replied coldly.

"Its too late to stop Operation Spartacus." Parangosky protested.

"I assumed as much." The Section III director raised an eyebrow. "The fact that a Spartan-IV is there is proof enough. A Spartan-II is one thing. You would have sent one as a vanguard, to set the operation in motion. You wouldn't risk sending anything less to do so. But an S-IV? You would have only allowed it if the Operation had passed the point of no return, when it was too late to stop, but needed more force to stay alive, lest the operation falls apart under its own weight as it were."

"The rebels already hated the Hegemony which treats them as little better than livestock...we are only offering minimal support." Parangosky replied.

"I would hardly call having Spartans fight beside them 'minimal' support" Hood answered critically.

"The natives are doing most of the fighting and dying Terrence...were just giving them enough support so that the rebels have a fighting chance" Parangosky objected, which was, if not quite a lie, certainly a dubious statement.

"We are not even trying to take the Hegemony away from the Council. We want the batarians to stay so that they can be our big backdoor into Citadel territory." the head of ONI explained.

"The UNSC will NOT be providing any official support to this...Rebellion, in any capacity...do you understand?" Hood coldly demands.

"It might too late to stop the ground war but if you start a real war

between us and the Council Races I will at minimum have you executed as a traitor and if necessary have all of Section III purged...and we both know the civilians and foreign powers will support me if I do" Hood says. Not threatening, because he doesn't have to. But a guarantee of what would happen if Parangosky and/or her people stepped far enough out of line.

****APUFMKI****

Denton crashed into his office chair almost as soon as the doors closed behind him. "First Impera, then Bluestone, and now Serana. Does the galaxy just want me to suffer?" It seemed as though the piles for the UNSC/UEG, and by default, for him, seemed to arise without end. First it was him becoming the head negotiator for the UNSC with the Citadel Council. Then he was saddled with being in charge of diplomatic relations with both the New Covenant and the Citadel Council. Then came the Bluestone issue, and all the headaches that came from it.

The only silver lining all of this had was the fact that, for once, Denton knew Bluestone's escape was not ONI. Whoever had done it, had done it without any of the finesse ONI's Section III usually operated with. Finesse being either a lack of evidence, or a high degree of efficiency. The carnage left behind spoke for itself. And the use of TTRs, why would ONI purposely leave behind witnesses implicating humanity?

For all the good that information did, as everyone was no doubt already blaming humanity. Along with it being extremely unlikely he, or anyone else, would be able to convince the Citadel races of that. "What else could go wrong?" He muttered to himself.

As if to answer him, his private terminal began beeping with an alert. "I just had to say somethingâ€¦" He muttered as he turned to read where the message was coming from.

"UNSC/UEG Embassy: Citadel Station. Caller ID: Ambassador Anita Goyle"

"Aw, cripes. Don't tell me this already made it that far already?" He asked himself, slapping his hand to face and dragging it across. "Alright let's see just what's the fallout from this is going to beâ€¦" Dreading all the while as he tapped the 'answer call' button.

"What the hell are you ONI bastards trying to do to me!" Anita Goyle screamed as soon as the connection was established. The image of her pretty face glaring hatefully at Denton.

"Bloody hell woman!" Denton all but threw himself into his seat. "Calm yourself down! It can't have been that bad?"

"How am I supposed to remain calm with the Office of Naval Intelligence deliberately sabotaging my mission!" Anita shot back.

"What? Did the news reach about Bluestone reach the Citadel already?" Denton was legitimately surprised, having not expected the news to travel that fast from the colony. "The fallout can't have been that bad. We got proof it wasn't even us."

Anita laughed in Denton's face. Replying contemptuously "Who cares about Bluestone anymore? I am talking about ONI's violent invasion of the Batarian Hegemony."

"Wait, what in the Forerunners are you talking about, the Hegemony? Bring me up to speed here. I just spent the last several hours in Slipspace between Jarum and Earth." Denton had a feeling he already knew just what Anita was talking about, and was praying to every deity he knew that he was wrong.

"The batarian ambassador just showed me and the Citadel Council video footage of SPARTANS aiding rebel terrorists in taking down government facilities. These rebels have already publicly stated their intent to overthrow the Hegemony and establish a new regime." Anita angrily explained.

"Jesus, Mary and Jospheh..." The ambassador whispered. "Are you telling me that, right now, there are Spartans, honest to god Spartans, fighting in the Hegemony?"

"Don't play dumb...I know you and other ONI bastards are pulling all the strings." Anita replied. For once in her career too angry to be diplomatic (or scared of ONI).

Anita Goyle had tried (with the best of her knowledge) to always bargain in good faith with the Citadel Council. Attempting to prove that humans could be decent, trustworthy people. But her superiors (or at least ONI) had made a liar out of her. Cynically using her face to project a trustworthy image as they attempted to undermine the Citadel Races from within.

Denton resisted the urge to facepalm as hard as he could. Operation Spartacus was not supposed to have gone like this. Not even remotely. "By the way your face is almost incandescent with rage, I assume that this proof, is actually proof?" Receiving a glare he return, he continued, "Right stupid question, what's the fallout so far?"

"In order to keep from provoking a war then and there, I denied everything and said any humans operating inside the Hegemony to overthrow the government were rogue elements with no ties to us...saying that the Hegemony could treat them as criminals." Anita explained.

That was actually good news. His eyes widening as he processed the information. Good for the UNSC as a whole, and the potentially, the operation. "That's, that's genius Anita!" A grin plastering itself on his face. "You have probably just saved the UNSC," 'and me,' he thought to himself, "from so many problems!" He may not have been completely onboard with the operation when it first began, but he had changed since then.

"Then Councilor Cicero told me the turians would be sending a fleet to 'suppress the terrorists'" Anita grimly explained.

The smile was wiped from his face. "Say what?" This Denton, nor did anyone else in Section III, did not expect. One of the core details about Spartacus was the assumption that absolutely no government, let alone one of the Council Races, would assist the Hegemony, when the Rebellion went public. As the Hegemony had soured diplomatic

relations with their peers over the course of centuries. "Would you kindly repeat that?"

"Councilor Cicero informed me that he had already spoken to the leader of the Turian Hierarchy and that the Primarch would be sending a fleet and an army to assist the batarian government in putting down the terrorists...apparently they hate us even more than the batarians...it might have something to do with ONI destroying one of their worlds for no reason." Anita said sarcastically.

This time Denton didn't even hesitate to facepalm, "Is that it so far? Doesn't sound so badâ€¦" Sarcasm dripping from every word. "Alright, keep me up to date Anita. Let me know the moment anything happens."

"Cicero also implied that the entire Council supports his actions...although I have no way of knowing if he was telling the truth." Anita admitted. But considering the way that the other Councilors had glared at Cicero as he spoke, she doubted the sincerity of his statement.

"Oh, great! That's all we need!" Denton could already see the reams of paperwork that would begin to pile on his desk from both the Bluestone Incident, and now this. "Any ideas just how truthful Cicero might have been? And what's been the public reaction so far?"

"How would I know what the public reaction is?" Anita asked with a cynical laugh.

"Ask around, talk to people, do your job" Denton said in annoyance. Finally starting to get angry in return.

"I can't even leave the embassy without being followed by an army of soldiers and C-Sec personnel, EVERYTHING I do on the Citadel is carefully monitored and recorded, besides nobody will talk to me because they all hate humans." Goyle explained.

"Brilliant, bloody fucking brilliant this. Alright, just keep us updated for now" Denton replied in frustration. Having had no idea that things had gotten that bad.

"I'll do my best but-" Anita's image momentarily broke up as her 'voice' turned to static. Then the image cleared up as Goyle sighed in annoyance. Informing Denton "its the embassy mainframe...the people on the Citadel are so paranoid about us hacking them that they've left legions of viruses for us to find whenever we try to access any systems on the Citadel."

Anita Goyle was if anything understating the problem. The entire area surrounding the embassy was a wireless dead zone, due to the powerful jamming fields that C-Sec had installed. Citadel Security claimed that it was for the human embassy's own protection, but everybody knew that it was to prevent any human AIs in the embassy from hacking things on the Citadel. Of course ONI tried to find ways around that to hack into Citadel communications anyway, but they were constantly bombarded by an ever increasing and sophisticated array of computer viruses.

Individually the viruses themselves weren't a problem, whatever issues they caused were resolved in short order. The problem was the

sheer volume of viruses. As soon as one virus was taken care of, another five were queued up to cause the same problems. Making matters worse were how they seemed to be planted everywhere the humans MIGHT access, leading to regular malfunctions in the embassy (and although the humans didn't know it, other parts of the station, but that was a price that the Powers That Be on the Citadel were willing to pay to restrict ONI's access).

So far, the viruses hadn't affected anything critical in the embassy like data servers and other critical stations, but everything else was affected. Plumbing, lights, water, environmental controls, absolutely everything. The worst to be hit being the Communications Relay between the Embassy on the Citadel and the closest UNSC/UEG communications relay. Drop outs, delays and the every hated 'lag', had become so common, it was worrying when they didn't happen.

'For the love of God Osmin, why couldn't you just leave this place well enough alone?!' Denton mentally shouted, knowing it was all the Protege's fault. Serin Osmin, compared to her mentor, was blunt, rash, and ruled by her emotions. Whereas the Section III director would have taken the time to set up a separate location for ONI to run its operations, Osmin, who was probably in charge of most operations in Citadel space, decided to just dump it all on the Embassy, and all the problems that came with it.

Making matters worse is the fact that the Embassy was the only place on the entire Citadel, outside of their private docks, that humans were even allowed to be on the station. Meaning that it was under constant surveillance for any signs of 'covert human activity'. Osmin was effectively taunting the damn Citadel Council with her actions, and for what!? It was as though she was trying to start a war with the Citadel Council. Denton pinched his nose as he thought to himself, 'Note to self: schedule a meeting with the bitch and her daughter. Pack TTRs'

Focusing back on Anita, he grimaced internally at what he was about to say.

"There is no campaign against the Hegemony. its your job to convince them of that and prevent a war...a war that we can't afford to start especially now" Denton told her, as he thought of increasing tensions with the New Covenant.

"Especially now." Anita said thoughtfully.

"You finally pushed the Covenant Races to the point where they look like there going to start pushing back didn't you?...and now ONI is trying to avoid provoking a war on two fronts against both galactic superpowers" Goyle guessed, not knowing that the New Covenant had already started 'pushing back.'

"Yes, perhaps we have." Denton admitted. 'Perhaps more than any of us realize.' He mentally added, recalling Serana's recall order.

"And now I have to clean up your mess." Anita said bitterly.

"Its not MY mess" Denton denied.

"BULLSHIT Doctor Denton...you were there when ONI destroyed Impera and you were there when ONI destroyed those ships right after the

treaty was signed" Anita shot back.

Rolling his eyes, Denton retorted, "If you had read the official reports, you would remember that Impera was caused by an idiot of a Prowler captain, and the Post-signing losses incurred was by the Everest's back-up AI following its last given orders." Shaking his head, he finished, "Call me back once there's been any changes, or once you manage to cool off." He shut down the terminal before the ambassador could get another word in edgeways, fury clear on her face just as the terminal shut down.

Denton had to admit though, if only to himself, that in Anita Goyle's position he would probably be just as angry. Aside from the fact that she was being expected to sell lies she knew were lies, her superiors had denied her vital information that she needed to do her job. It was when a diplomat was put in a position where their own superiors lied to them and they had to learn the truth from the enemy.)

But most of all, finding out that people blamed him for the destruction of Impera stung. As though he had personally made the call to deploy the UNSC's most powerful weapon at a whim. He may be a part of ONI, but it wasn't as though he lacked morals. The only silver lining was his reputation before Impera meant that most people didn't blame him for what ONI did. Still, his association with the brutal clandestine branch of the UNSC meant those who did blame him, saw him as guilty by pure association.

Alan Denton realized for the first time, that all the good he did might be forgotten, both by the public and history. That his reputation would be forever tainted and defined by his association with moral monsters such as Parangosky. But stillâ€¦

"Somebody's got to prevent the galaxy from sliding into another Great War" Denton said to himself and the universe at large.

So, unacknowledged and unappreciated though his efforts might be, Denton tried to figure out how to do just that.

****APUFMKII****

"By Kalros and all her spawn, just what were you thinking Cicero!?" Wrex roared, slamming a mighty fist against the wall, using all of his considerable restraint to not throttle his turian counterpart right then and there. "I don't care that you want to help the thrice-damned batarians, but why did you have to involve us?!"

Wrex's ire was mirrored by his asari and salarian counterparts, though they were slightly more composed. Tevos held a glass of Thessian Brandy while Vald'n had hypodermic needle pen in his hand, loaded with a relaxant, some of which he already injected. For once, their advisors and Saren were absent, as the four of them had started the impromptu meeting immediately after the session with the Hegemony and UEG ambassadors.

Cicero, to his credit, appeared to be unperturbed. "I simply assumed that your assistance would be given. After all, you three had promised it."

"That was in the event that UNSC involvement was proven to be a

factor, Cicero." Tevos countered, appearing to be more calm than she actually felt. "As of right now, because of how you chose to force this issue on the human ambassador, rather than take advantage of their ignorance of our awareness, they have disavowed their agents publically, rather than privately."

"So, what does it matter? That simply means that whatever humans we find in the Hegemony are ours to do as we see fit, when we capture them."

Tevos shook her head at Cicero's ignorance, 'or was it idiocy in this case', she thought to herself. "Because Cicero, if we had been more cautious in the rather public session, we could have allowed the public to think it was the UNSC, and when we moved to assist the Hegemony, the public would have seen us as aiding the Hegemony against the UNSC. Now, with the humans publicly disavowing any and all humans in the Hegemony, there is room for doubt. That these humans truly are acting independently. And that any aid we send, is to help the bastardous hegemony survive their comeuppance, rather than fighting against the UNSC. Doubt that we can ill afford."

"You still think this is about regular politics don't you?" Cicero replied, a note of genuine surprise in his voice.

"Everything is ultimately political...the humans may be powerful and ambitious but eventually once they realize they cannot achieve everything that they want through fighting they will begin to come around to our point of view" Tevos answered.

"You wouldn't say that if you had toured Palaven after the humans left...I know ever since you asari discovered the Mass Relays you have dealt with virtually every new race from a position of strength...but these humans are different...their technology is more advanced, their weapons are more powerful, and they have already been bloodied by a conflict that was as bad as the Rachni War...THEY DON'T NEED US...but we still have things they wantâ€|and they will take them by force if we look weak" Cicero explained. Trying to get the other Councilors (none of whom had actually faced the humans on the battlefield) to understand just how much the rules had changed.

"You think the humans are testing us by trying to subvert the Hegemony" Vald'n observed.

"They might not think of it that way but yes...despite all the humans technology we are strong and numerous enough that making war on all of us could cost them dearly...but if they can take down our species and government one at a time without ever having to fight all the Citadel Races they can conquer us easily at little cost or risk to themselves...if we let the Hegemony fall without helping the batarians the humans will probably go after the other Associate Races next and eventually the Union, Hierarchy, and of course the Asari Republics," Cicero calmly stated.

"Perhaps." Tevos conceded. "But that still does not take away from the fact that you squandered one of our of greatest opportunities, nor the fact that you all but declared public support for the Hegemony, Cicero. The people will not be happy about this." Tevos felt confident that, in her opinion, the people would only support Cicero for going against quote unquote, "independent" humans in the Hegemony, for so long. Then they would turn on him for ensuring a

government and nation that upheld values that they saw as abhorrent, would stay standing.

"She's right." Wrex now having calmed down, could think more clearly. "When word of this gets out, we're going to have a public relations nightmare on our hands. It won't be riots or anything, but we can definitely expect movements and calls to leave the Hegemony to its own devices."

"Yes well, political ramifications aside. I think something as equally as important is: just what are we going to do about said humans?" Vald'n questioned. "We all know that the human ambassador's public disavowing of those humans was only to prevent a declaration of war, or anything of the sort. But we all know that it is also a pile of varren shit, pardon my words. And that these humans are the same ones that so thoroughly humiliated us years ago."

"And what's your point?" Cicero was getting irked by how the salarian was treating him as though he were a juvenile fresh into boot. Having to be strung along by his fringe, because he didn't know any better.

Vald'n sighed at Cicero's impatience. "My point is, we can't just throw ships and troops at the problem and hope it resolves itself. If these, super-soldiers," He waved his hands around for emphasis, "are indeed there, then the only thing we'd be doing by sending in troops would be adding to the body count. I think we can all recall the casualties a small squad of those elites managed to pull off, when they were here?" Only Tevos and Wrex actually cringed as they recalled the numbers.

"It doesn't matter...if we lose the Hegemony, the batarians will only be the first to fall." Cicero said with certainty. "After that, who knows who the humans will target next? One of the associate race, or one of us? I'd rather send in as many as it takes to end this as quickly as possible."

"What if the STG was able to quietly end the Slave Rebellion...then there would be no need for the Hierarchy to send its fleet." Vald'n replied thoughtfully.

"We already promised the batarians military support...and the Hierarchy takes those commitments very seriously." Cicero pointed out.

"True but you can certainly delay sending the fleet for a month or twoâ€¦and if the rebellion is over by thenâ€¦" Vald'n helpfully added.

"Special forces would be much less likely to draw notice or retaliation than a army." Tevos agreed.

"And they'd be a hell of lot more effective than a bunch of random grunts." Wrex added. "The only thing I don't like is that we'd relying entirely on the salarian team for this. I don't know ring about you, but one thing I've learned about plans like this, they rarely go how you want to."

"So what would you suggest?"

"We each send a squad, STG, Commandos, whoever. If one team fails, another one can pick up the slack. At any rate, we don't risk the everything if the STG gets found out." Wrex

explained. "We can send in another set of squads with the Hierarchy fleet if we have to."

"One squad from each of us won't be enough...still the idea is sound...if all of us agree to send our special forces I can probably get the Primarch to delay sending the fleet for a few months...but we ALL need to contribute." Cicero said as he stared pointedly at Tevos.

"That, will not be an issue. I promise you, the Asari Commando Corps will deploy its best, and in numbers." For once, Tevos wasn't lying through her teeth. The ACC would jump at the opportunity to take on the human super soldiers, having been eager since the Council's kidnapping, and the humiliation they suffered. "Though, admittedly it may take some time to deploy them." Here, she was lying. The ACC was in a constant ready status, able to deploy at moment's notice. Tevos only lied because she was going to use the time to ensure there wouldn't be a mass exodus of the ACC to the Hegemony. She wasn't sure if the other would have the same problems or not.

"We can have Blackwatch on the batarian homeworld within a day and I would be surprised if the STG can't at least match that." Cicero said confidently, Valdn nodding in confirmation when the others looked towards him.

"Despite my reservations, Cicero is indeed right. We can't let the humans divide us." Tevos murmured sadly. "Despite how it may disgust us personally, we can not allow the Hegemony to destroy itself under the machinations of the humans."

"Although, if the Hegemony survives the human onslaught, we still must rid ourselves of the current government at some point in the near future. The Batarian Hegemony has always been the weak link amongst the Associate Races: being the most ambitious, least liked, and most aggressive. If the humans had been less arrogant, they might have offered the batarians a share of our territory in exchange for fighting against the Citadel. Under such circumstances I doubt that we could count on the Hegemony's loyalty." Valdn pessimistically concluded.

"You're probably right Valdn...but the Hegemony must end on our terms...not at the hands of humans and their puppets...agreed?" Cicero asked as he stared at his peers.

The other Councilors all voiced their agreement (except Wrex who merely nodded). Even the normally diplomatic Tevos. Thinking that it would be better to send in covert operatives from all the Council Races instead an actual army. Believing (or at least hoping) that such half measures would be enough.

Though none of the Councilors knew it, this marked the beginning of the Shadow War between the Citadel Council, and the United Nations Space Corps.

Author's Note:

aDarkOne here.

My relationship with this story began as just a reviewer. Then Follower and I started communicating about what he wanted to do with the story. He was impressed enough by what I said that he asked me to be his Beta, then after I had been doing that for awhile he asked me to be his co-author.

The change in the direction of the story is somewhat due to my influence. Three topics I especially like reading and writing about are sex, violence, and intrigue. Because of the restrictions on FF any sexual content will probably be heavily toned down, but that doesn't apply to violence or intrigue.

War is coming again, but right now none of the main factions want to leap into a full scale war against their principal rivals. The UNSC still hasn't recovered completely from the Great War, and the New Covenant is just starting to recover from their own civil war and ONI's decades long campaign of assassinations and sabotage against them. In terms of industry and population, the Citadel Races are the largest and healthiest of all three superpowers, but they're massively outgunned by Covenant Races and humanity, and without useable Slipspace technology they can't even reach most human or New Covenant worlds.

However, the turians haven't forgotten or forgiven Impera, the New Covenant may never forgive what it regards as decades of betrayal by their human 'allies,' and of course the UNSC (especially ONI) still has grudges and ambitions of its own. As for what will happen with the batarians...well you will just have to continue reading to find out.

I will say though, that the the Batarian Civil War, was at least partially inspired by real events such as the Vietnam War, the First Iraq War, and the Korean War. It has also been influenced by Sci-Fi such Star Wars and Star Trek (especially DS9).

Follower38 here. Yes I know most of you are disappointed by the fact that the UNSC and the Citadel Council will apparently be not engaging in an open war. But as my co-writer has said, neither faction are really in any condition for an all out war that would not leave them ridiculously vulnerable to the New Covenant. And even if that were not the case, the UNSC would easily win the conflict.

Much like during the Great War, the Citadel Council does not know where the majority of the UNSC colonies are, only the potential locations of sum. And even then, they would have to contend with a CDF fleet protecting each world/system. Along with any CDF or UNSC reinforcements. Before they can even consider attacking any UNSC world, they would have to refit a massive number of ships, at least several hundred, before they were in any position to lay siege to any UNSC system. While they are refitting their ships, the UNSC would be free to simply lay waste to the homeworld systems of the Citadel Races by jumping there via their own, and more powerful, slipspace drives. Then, they would have the choice of either taking the system by conventional methods, following the methods of the Covenant, or simply begin nuking worlds to a cinder. All the while the Citadel Races are at this point, still madly trying to refit their vessels.

And my co-writer was half-correct about the Citadel Races not having slip-space technology. They do have the technology, but only the bare basics. Nowhere near the scale they need for a full-scale war, and they know it.

And quite honestly, I want to have a prolonged, semi-equalized conflict. Equalized in the sense that it's not like a martial artist's master fighting someone who just became a black belt, and more of two third degree black belts, one fresh and one about to become a fourth degree, duking it out. That's the best metaphor I can think of.

That being said, when war does happen, well, can't say anything without spoilers really except that it'll be worth the wait.

However, to satisfy you all somewhat, the Shadow War...well, I think I can safely say that many of you will be happy with it.

Also, some of you will probably say something along the lines of that's not possible, or that doesn't make sense for some things. Well please keep in mind, that's the best me and my co-writer could come up with. You can criticize us, but please do not be scathing about it. No, I am not referring to those of you that usually point these out to us. Though, some of you have come off a little more scathing as of late. Anyways, I will talk with my co-writer, but I am looking for another person to discuss war knowledge with as well. Specifically military codes, behaviors etc. If only to better my own knowledge. There is only so much one can learn through the internet.

21. Shadow War: Humility and Murphy's Law

Chapter 21

Shadow War: Humility and Murphy

"Treason, Terrorism, and Revolution. There is a very fine line dividing them all. It does not take much, for one to become other."

-Professor Micheal Donovan, Director of Criminal Justice of New Alexandria College

High Admiral Datak Korra was the most powerful person in the Batarian Hegemony. Although he was technically outranked by the President of the Hegemony, and answered to the Supreme Senate, in reality Korra did largely as he pleased. The military had dominated the regime for generations, and as head of the military, Datak set the tone for the entire Hegemony.

The old batarian soldier was large and battle scarred with an even more fearsome reputation. He was the victor of over a hundred battles, and was said to be the only batarian alive that Councilor Wrex respected, if only for his skill and experience. According to rumor, he had once taken down a battlemaster armed with nothing but a spoon, some rope, and his wits (which might have something to do with why Wrex respected him).

Datak had dominated the Hegemony for decades, its ever more aggressive stance was largely at his direction, and the political

maneuvering that had allowed it to escape the consequences of such actions was also largely due to his influence.

As a result, admiral Korra was the obvious one for the leaders of the asari, krogan, turian, and salarian special forces to meet with once they were sent to the Hegemony, to help put down the slave rebellion. Of course, due to his malignant influence on Citadel politics the battlemasters, commandos, STG operatives, and Blackwatch members currently in the high admiral's office would have gladly seen him dead. Unfortunately for all concerned, these were not normal circumstances.

"You've been in the Hegemony for almost a month...have you made any progress in tracking down the terrorists and their human masters?" Datak coldly asked.

The STG commander shook his head no. "We have been making some progress, but nothing on the scale desirable." Seeing the raised eye ridge, the salarian continued. "These terrorists are operating in cells, each divided from the rest, and knowing only what they are told. It's made it difficult, though not impossible, to track the cells down."

The asari commando leader added, "We've been tracking down cell after cell, but we're basically nibbling at these terrorists. Whoever is in charge of all of them, is not just smart, but strategically brilliant. They've made it damn difficult to take down the whole organization, unless the leadership is taken out. Who might as well be a Prothean, for how well they've hidden themselves."

Datak Korra looked critically at the aliens arrayed before him. Knowing that these were exactly the sort of people the Salarian Union, Krogan Empire, Turian Hierarchy, or even Asari Republics might have sent to eliminate him under other circumstances. Grimly amused at the situation as he said. "Do you know what would happen if the Hegemony fell at human hands?"

"You mean aside from the death of a corrupt and abominable government that should have fallen centuries ago?" One of the krogans answered, drawing more than a few grins and approving looks from his peers.

"If your people really cared about our CORRUPTION, krogan they would have done something about it centuries ago...but that's not important...the important thing IS if the humans successfully steal the Hegemony from us all the other Associate Races will lose faith in your ability to protect them...it will also embolden the apes to commit further acts of aggression against you...it will probably only be a matter of time until they sign MUTUAL PROTECTION treaties with groups like the hanar or even volus assuming that they don't simply outright conquer them...and once they have dealt with all the Associate Races they will come for the krogan, turians, salarians, and even the poor asari." Datak explained with a sneer, his extensive facial scars making the expression even more ugly.

The commandos all scowled at the thought, despite whatever their personal feelings may have been, they couldn't deny that Datak was right on all counts. If the humans managed to bring down the Hegemony, from within no less, than how long would it be before they turned their attention elsewhere?

As no one tried to argue his point, Datak continued. "So, considering what you have all said, the usual methods for taking down terrorists such as these, are obviously useless. That being said, we need a new plan. Do any of you have any suggestions?"

"Long term the only solution to prevent unrest is reform your system of slavery...short term however you must make the people hate the rebels more than their government" Kirrahe concluded.

Datak snorted, "The first is all but impossible, as you all are well aware. Asking us to change that, is the same as asking your people to change your faiths. The second however, is easily achieved. The terrorists will do that for us, they already have been since the beginning." This was true, the majority of rebel atrocities had simply been kept from becoming public knowledge, something that Datak was now planning on changing.

"Until we know more our best strategy is decapitation...kill the heads of the Rebellion, and the body should die afterward." the oldest battlemaster there added.

"Then we can begin planning our counterattack against the UNSC." Datak Korra replied with a vicious grin.

When the special forces people looked back at him in confusion or disbelief, knowing just how much humanity outgunned the Council Races, Datak explained. Telling them, "All out war may not be necessary, or even winnable. But if we don't strike back now, they will simply keep on attacking us. We must show them that there is a cost to their aggression."

The elite warriors nodded in agreement at that. Although Korra didn't think of it that way, his own regime was a prime example of that. The batarians had abused their neighbors for centuries because nobody had been motivated and/or strong enough to make them stop. Now these humans seemed to think that they could do the same.

It was their job to prove the humans wrong.

****APUFMKII****

Hidden across Khar'Shan, safe houses had been set up by the dozens by the Rebellion, at the behest of John. These safe houses were the only locations that the Rebels could find safe refuge, for obvious reasons. Each cell within the Rebellion having access to a total of four safe houses, or least knowledge of them. Few if any safe houses were shared, and all were thought to be secure and hidden from the Hegemony.

At least that was the assumption.

Inside one of the safe houses, this one closer to Overseer City, a group of rebels were relaxing, having just returned after a quick hit and run against the local police department headquarters. Nothing major, as they would consider it. Just a few skycars blown-up with some homemade explosives, along with the station's courtyard and lobby. They had been and in out before most anyone could realize what was happening.

Two of them, turians, were sharing a drink over their success. "Did you see the looks on their faces! Those bare-faced bastards got what they deserved!" His companion laughed uproariously. "I mean, just one little chain explosion, and they're all running like scared brats! Ha!"

Across from the pair, the rest of their fellow rebels were patching what wounds they had, were stocking away their weapons, or taking off their armor. After all, they no reason to think they would be attacked here, right?

But their optimism was misplaced. A squad of STG operatives had been tailing the rebels for days. Studying their movements, learning their ways, and evaluating their defenses. Preparing for just the right moment to attack.

"I tell you our luck's finally changing for the better" the turian rebel continued to boast as salarian covert operatives snuck into the base. Sharing a drink with his comrades as they toasted their success.

He was far from the only rebel getting drunk. Heady with the taste of victory the rebels were celebrating; eating, drinking, and (in a few cases) fornicating. The entire thirteen person cell had let their guard down.

Outside, a number of STG gathered around the safehouse door. "Alpha team, in position." One of the squad moved up the door, planting a small sphere on the door. "Ready to breach and clear."

Across from the safe house, two sniper/spotter teams were watching the rebels from their perches, their targets completely unaware of their presence. "Overwatch in position."

"Take them out." Inside, one of the rebels was taking a swig from a bottle when a high-powered rifle round blew his head off.

"NO!" Vorok Tremen, the male batarian who was the leader of the rebel cell screamed as he saw his friend shot down. Grabbing a gun and leaping for cover as a round from a sniper just missed him. Others died as more rounds perforated the safe house, ripping through windows and bodies.

Outside, the STG team finally got their orders. "Breach and clear!" With a deafening boom, the door was blasted into the room, decapitating one unfortunate rebel as it sliced into a wall through sheer force. Barely, did anyone realize what was going on as three tiny spheres were tossed into the room, before letting out a deafening screech and a flare brighter than a dozen suns, blinding everyone inside.

The STG team rushed inside, "LOWER YOUR WEAPONS AND SURRENDER!" a mechanically magnified voice shouted at Tremen and few other rebels trying to get on their feet. But while the rebels lacked training or professionalism, they were certainly not deficient in courage. Despite being blinded, none of them even considered surrendering, although that was partially due to the fact that a fate worse than death awaited them if they were turned over to the batarian authorities.

"FUCK YOU!" Vorok screamed at the heavily armed salarians slowly advancing on him and the two other upright rebels through the abandoned building serving as their safe house. Ironically enough, both his comrades were salarians themselves.

But neither of them had combat training and it showed. The fact they were still discombobulated by the flashbangs didn't help. Spraying with their weapons in the general direction of the door, their shots went wild. At the show of resistance, the STG team peppered them with shots, taking them down just as quickly as when they had entered. Suddenly Vorok Tremem stood alone. The batarian screamed in defiance and prepared to charge the salarians, only to gape in shock as one of them literally shot his gun out of his hand.

That remarkable display of marksmanship, combined with suddenly finding himself unarmed and alone, took most of the wind out of Vorok's sails. As he realized just how utterly outclassed he truly was. Expecting to be shot dead at any moment, or be taken prisoner.

But to his surprise, the salarians talked to him instead.

"Vorok Tremem. We have an offer for you: Protection, in exchange for your knowledge of the Rebellion."

"And if I refuse, you'll just kill me? Go ahead." Vorok sneered. He, like everyone else involved in the Rebellion, did not fear death as they used to.

The STG squad commander didn't flinch at the insinuation. "No..WE, will not do anything. Should you refuse the offer, we shall simply turn you over to the Hegemony. Comply, and we will keep you hidden from them." The squad leader told him coldly.

Vorok stared at the salarian in horror. He knew of what the Hegemony would do if they got their hands on him. Their information collection agents had a notorious reputation of getting whatever information they wanted, and breaking their victims. If they got their hands on him, the least he could expect would be them tormenting him until he begged for death and squeezing him for information until he popped.

The batarian thought about trying to provoke the salarians into killing him. It would mean the others would die as well, but be spared the torture at the hands of the Hegemony.

As though sensing his thoughts however, the squad leader also added, "And those here with you as well."

"What?" Vorok muttered as he looked around. Aside from the turian and few others, the majority of those here were still alive, evidenced by how they were frog-marched from their rooms by STG, some barely dressed or totally naked.

"Work with us, and the Hegemony will believe you all to be dead. Refuse, and we will hand you over to them."

Vorok Tremem was prepared to die. He was even prepared to send his comrades to their deaths. But the thought of ending up in the custody of Hegemony filled him with terror.

"What do you want to know?" Vorok whispered in defeat.

Behind his polarized helmet, the STG squad leader smiled.

"Everything."

****APUFMKII****

Jella Korragan moaned as Cara T'Val kissed her between the thighs. Running her hands lightly over the asari's crest as the maiden pleased her. The two naked females (Jella didn't care what anybody said, as far as she was concerned the asari were girls) writhing against each other as they made love.

Actually the fact that Cara was a girl was a point in her favor, as far as Jella was concerned. After being sexually abused by her master, the thought of being intimate with another male filled Jella with fear and loathing. But Cara's blue body was far less threatening than an aroused male's. Korragan was intrigued by her lush curves and ardent moans. Moreover, through their Melds Cara could share her desire and pleasure with the batarian. Turning every kiss and caress into a shared experience.

It was a lovely moment.

Ruined by John Doe violently bursting into the room.

"Hello John here to join us?" Cara purred at the Spartan as she realized who it was. Her earlier animosity towards the soldier forgotten at the moment. Guiding Jella to a blue breast as her eyes took on an ebony hue.

Under any other circumstances, most men, and women, would have taken up Cara on her offer. The Spartan however, was all business.

Ignoring the scene before him, John just said, "Get dressed, both of you. We've abandoning this site." Without any further explanation, the Spartan left the room, leaving the pair thoroughly confused.

Nevertheless they trusted John, for the most part, they still had some reservations after learning of his humanity from that incident. However they may have felt about being barged in on, they both knew John wouldn't do anything so rash without reason. So they rapidly got dressed. Jella making sure that neither left the room until they were both wearing far more weapons than clothes.

"What's going on John?" Jella demanded to know as she left the room. Around them, others were clearing out the safe house, grabbing weapons, ammo, and whatever else they could take with them. Whatever they couldn't, was being thrown into corner to be destroyed. Thermite charges were being prepped to burn the material to be left behind. Realizing that John was more focused on cleaning house, Jella shouted. "John!" Finally getting the super-soldier's attention, she asked again. "Just what is going on!"

"We're under attack." John said.

"Wait, right now?" Jella all but shouted, reaching for her rifle when

she felt John put a hand on her shoulder.

"No, not here. Not right now." Jella almost collapsed in relief, only for that feeling to be replaced by dread. "It's the Rebellion. Someone is systemically targeting us. Wiping us out, cell by cell. We've lost contact with almost thirty cells already."

"Is it the Hegemony?" Cara asked, feeling terrified at the thought of the Hegemony getting their act together.

John shook his head. "If only it were so simple." Taking a moment to assist a rebel with a thermite charge, he turned back to lovers. "Whoever this is, they are on a whole other level. Far more skilled and coordinated than the Hegemony could ever be."

"So what do we do until then?"

"We fall back, regroup, until we find out just who and what we are dealing with."

"And then?"

John paused, looking the pair in the eyes. Both shuddered at the aura of power the Spartan projected. "Counterattack." With a single word, both women were absolute in the belief that the Spartan, even not knowing his targets, would take the fight to their unknown enemies and destroy them, whoever they were.

****APUFMKII****

Spartan Kelly-087 was like a geist as she moved through the slums of Overseer city, hiding within the shadows, and moving with barely a whisper. As the fastest of the Spartans, along with Linda-058, the elite of elite snipers of humanity, she was usually the one conducting recon of locations for the Spartans.

The slums, the lowest levels of the city. Just a hair above the sublevels, the area stank of filth and unwashed bodies, the buildings obviously old and in a state of ill repair. An atmosphere of misery, fear, and quiet desperation seemed to dominate the slums. Filling the female Spartan with an odd mixture of pity and contempt.

Despite all the physical and mental hardship she had endured during her training, Kelly had always known that she (along with the other Spartans) was special and valued, they were meant to be the Protectors of Earth and All her Colonies. That was the reason/excuse they were given for the hardships they endured as part of the Spartan Program. But these people were ignored at best and treated as scum at worst by their own society and government, without the excuse of a greater good to take solace in.

Right now, the reason for her being here was that she was tasked with the searching of potential safehouse and dead drop locations, along with any potentials to recruit into the Rebellion, in this area. So far, the results had been less than promising. On both accounts.

In terms of potential recruits, all of those she had found were either too broken or too old to be of use or aid to the Rebellion. Many of them were broken by the Hegemony that even if the opportunity to enact retribution was given to them, at best, they would not take

it. At worst, they would call the Hegemony.

She had more luck finding dead drop locations for intel and supplies. Locations where supplies could be stocked for a quick grab, but nothing to serve as a safe house. Either there was too great a risk of discovery, or was an obvious deathtrap, having almost no secondary exits, or too easily turned into a killbox: a location where it would be easy to focus fire on. The nearest rebel cell was supposed to meet with Kelly soon, to give her insight into the area, but she doubted it would be a real help.

'Goddamn it...these batarians are so cheap you can't even trust the floor.' Kelly thought as she realized the ground was groaning under her feet. The extremely weathered concrete having not been maintained in the slightest since it had been first laid. Taking another step forward, the concrete crumbled under her half ton weight. She managed to utter, "Oh crap." as the ground gave way.

Kelly fell over two dozen feet, and two sublevels, only her armor preventing the fall from seriously injuring her. Hitting floor with a thud as she grunted in pained surprise. Wearily getting up only to realize that she was surrounded by blue faces.

"Oh shit, ambush!" Kelly and the twenty four asari commandos exclaimed in unison. The commandos having just established this safe house in the old sewer system beneath the slums. And assuming that the human soldier literally dropping in on them was a deliberate attack.

"What kind of crazy bitch falls down a hole just to get the drop on someone!" The leader of the commandos swore as she opened fire. One of her subordinates answering the rhetorical question.

"That crazy bitch!" As she hit Kelly with a biotic warp, only for the dark energy to splatter apart as it impacted the Spartan's shields, making them shimmer gold.

"These asari weakened the floor so I would literally fall into their trap" Kelly thought as she got her bearings back, her HUD blaring at her about her depleting shields as they weathered the torrent of fire. As her body finally realized what was happening, her body surged with adrenaline, her reflexes kicking in and time appearing to slow down as she entered 'Spartan Time'.

Forgoing her pistol, Kelly charged forward, seizing a commando in front of her by the neck and spinning her around. Snapping the asari's neck even as she used the body as a meat shield.

"Fuck, it got Kisala!" A commando screamed, "How the hell is it so fast!?" To the Commandos, the human had been barely a blur. One moment it had been on its back, the next, one of their friends was dead! To the commandos, it was like a biotic charge!

Kelly dropped the perforated body, sprinting to another pair of asari, an arm outstretched. Clotheslining one of them, taking her head clean off, while grabbing the other one again, using them as a shield in an attempt to give her shields a chance to recharge.

What Kelly had no way of knowing though, was the way that many of the surviving commandos were analysing her movements. She had the best

training that the UNSC could give any of its soldiers. But all the commandos she was facing literally had, by human standards, several lifetimes worth of combat experience. When she took out another commando with a shot to the face she unknowingly gave away a bit of her fighting style. Allowing her next intended victim to anticipate and dodge the follow up attack.

"Everybody aim for center mass and use your biotics!" The squad leader ordered her surviving troops. "Get that thing off the ground! Don't let it move!" Even as she shouted this, six more of her troops were cut down with precise headshots, the Spartan moving to avoid being locked on.

'Who are these people?' Kelly thought to herself as she kept moving to avoid being shot. 'How were they able to dodge me?' Rarely has she ever encountered someone since her augmentation capable of dodging her unless she allowed it. As she tried to sprint to another target, she found herself floating in the air. "What the?!" Kelly shouted in shock.

Around her, six of the commandos had dropped their weapons, their faces grimacing in concentration, biotics flaring as they lifted the half ton Spartan into the air. "This thing is heavy!" One of the Commando's cried. "I don't know how much longer we can hold it!" Some of the asari had blood dripping down from their noses from the exertion.

The rest of the surviving commandos opened fire, all targeting the same small area on Kelly's torso where her armor looked weakest. The Spartan's HUD warning her that the structural integrity was becoming dangerously compromised thanks to concentrated and sustained fire aimed at her torso.

Kelly drew her pistol and tried to turn so she could aim at one of the blue glowing she was experiencing was close to zero-gravity, but damned different as well. Still, it just meant she had to compensate. Pieces of the armor began flying off as the concentrated fire finally took its toll.

'Damn it! I need to get out of this!' Realizing that trying to take them out one by one was not happening, she reached into her belt. Grabbing two spheres before pressing their buttons, igniting them in a blue flame before throwing it at the closest asari.

The unfortunate commando screamed as the grenades attached to her. "GET IT OFF ME! GET IT OFF ME!" The powerful adhesives burning through her armor and flesh. Giving her just long enough to truly panic before detonating.

At ground zero, flesh, metal and stone were vaporized in a instance by super-heated plasma. The asari it had stuck to and those closest to them, wiped from existence before the plasma could cool. The survivors diving into the sewage as their clothes and skin flash-ignited from the plasma superheating the air.

Kelly crashed to the floor again. She assumed that the battle would be easier now, very few people ever recovered quickly from a point-blank encounter with a plasma grenade unless they were veterans. But the leader of the commandos was made of sterner stuff than her followers, her centuries of experience helping recovery far

more quickly than any human. Even though she was covered in her comrades blood and her clothes were burning she remained on the offensive. Using her powers to their uttermost to hit Kelly with a Reave just as she touched the ground.

Kelly screamed as the biotic attack began to scramble her very nervous system, her shields shattered by the plasma, went right through her armor. Attacking her body and mind directly. Her armor and cybernetic enhancements actually making her more vulnerable to the assault, due to how MJOLNIR armor responds to thoughts and well as physical action. Her armor began to spasm, her left arm and right leg began to spasm wildly with the armor, tearing muscles and cracking the nearly indestructible bones beneath them.

The strain of overusing her biotics (when she was already injured) on the asari matron was obvious. Blood was flowing freely from her nose, and began to run from her eyes and mouth. Nevertheless her example had inspired her five remaining squadmates, who also attempted to hit the Spartan with Reave attacks.

"Take the monster down now!" Before any of the commandos could fulfill the order, a headshot took out the squad leader. As the rebel cell that Kelly was supposed to meet at this exact time, gathered around the hole the Spartan had fallen through.

The asari commandos were elite warriors with centuries of combat experience, the best gear available to their people, and in most cases a well developed killer instinct. But they were tired, wounded, in many cases their equipment was heavily damaged, and all their attention was focused on Kelly. As a result, the rebels were able to easily shoot them down.

Diving into the sewers, the rebels moved to assist the Spartan. It takes four of them to get her back on her feet. "You okay ma'am?" One of them asked.

"Just get me back to John and I'll be fine." She answered, getting dubious looks from all of them. Her shields were fluctuating from the contact, her armor was cracked and dented but largely intact, and there were more than a few places that was leaking blood. But they didn't say anything.

If Kelly's brain hadn't felt like it was on fire, she might have appreciated the the irony of being saved by the very kind of people that she was feeling sorry for and superior to mere minutes ago. But probably not. Even Spartans were usually all too human.

****APUFMKI****

-Warning: Graphic scene imminent-

-Refer to next bracket to avoid graphic scene-

However, compared to other humans involved in Operation Spartacus Kelly was relatively fortunate.

In a secret Hegemony prison facility miles under Overseer City a special interrogation was taking place. As the batarians and their STG allies questioned the first ONI agent unlucky enough to fall into

the hands of the Hegemony. A man who had let his guard down while on Khar'Shan, assuming that the local 'primitives' were no real threat (now he would most likely pay for his hubris with his life).

"Hey, wake up!" The Hegemony interrogator jabbed the firestick into the human's side, making him scream in pain. "That's better."

Peter Clark glared at his tormentor. Although if Peter was honest, he had only himself to blame for being in his predicament. He had wandered away from his team when he heard there was an alien brothel nearby. But the man had immediately lost interest upon realizing that none of the 'girls' at the brothel were asari, and all of them were obviously miserable (and quite possibly diseased) slaves.

However, on Peter's way back to the safehouse something had knocked him out. When he had awoken up a little while later, Clark had found himself, naked, unarmed, chained, and blindfolded. The blindfold hadn't been taken off until he reached this cell filled with implements of torture. Now he was at the mercy of beings that he was increasingly coming to realize had none.

"Don't be so rough with this one." The STG operative chided, "He's the only one we've gotten so far that wasn't just some random mongrel."

"Pain will loosen his tongue...it always does." The batarian interrogator said with a sadistic laugh. Looking at how the naked human male was bound (with his arms chained above his head and his feet secured to the floor, leaving his entire body vulnerable and exposed) appreciatively.

Solik Gurji eyed his fellow interrogator with barely hidden distaste. While Solik was willing to inflict pain on the Salarian Union's enemies to fulfill his missions, he was not a sadist. Zo'or Blanca's obvious enjoyment at tormenting the human disgusted him. "Just don't go overboard. He dies, we're back to where we began."

"Yeah, yeah. I hear you." Zo'or retorted. "Now then, humanâ€¦" His fingers danced across the tools arrayed on the table. "We're going to play a little game: tell me what I want to know...and maybe, you'll die with some dignity intact." Hearing something clicking away, finding the source as the human itself. "Don't bother with your implant. Whatever it was, we got it already. See?" To prove his point, he shook a jar in front of the agent, the object inside clinking away.

Peter Clark shuddered as he realized that his captors had deprived him of his 'easy' way out. Like all ONI agents who did field work he had been implanted with a cyanide capsule inside a false tooth. That way that they could easily commit suicide if they were captured, rather than by tortured for ONI secrets. But now that path was closed to him.

"I told you before...I'm just a smuggler who wanted to sample Overseer City's nightlife...frankly I was looking for some decent alien pussy when you snatched me off the street." Clark said as sincerely as he could.

"A smuggler with a false tooth loaded with a fast acting poison?" Solik snorted. "Yes, and I'm just a simple militiaman. Do not try to

lie to me, I know a peer when I see one."

Seeing that keeping up the ruse was a fool's errand, the agent dropped the act. "Then what the hell is he?" Peter asked with a bitter nod towards Zo'or.

"Technically I'm a military interrogator...but I prefer to think of myself as an artist...taking the raw materials my superiors give me and turning it into something pleasing in their eyes" Zo'or replied mildly as he studied his tools. Deciding whether he wanted to use the tools that were sharp, the ones that were hot, or implements of torture that were both hot AND sharp. "Now then...before we get started let me prepare the subject so he knows the medium were working with" Without any hesitation, Zo'or stabbed the firestick to Clark's neck, magnifying the pain tenfold.

When the interrogator removed the firestick, Solik grabbed the human by the neck before he could gasp in relief. "To start, I want to know how many of you are there?"

Looking the STG agent in the eye, the agent answered. "Clark, Peter. Second Lieutenant. Service number: 01855-33745-CP."

"Enough personal triviaâ€¦I want to know how many people the Office of Naval Intelligence brought to Hegemony space" Zo'or said casually as he used the pain stick on Clark again.

"Clark, Peter. Second Lieutenant. Service number: 01855-33745-CP."

Zo'or responded with a grunt of annoyance and by violently pushing the firestick into Clark's genitals. Smiling in satisfaction as the man howled in pain.

"Stop that you could kill him." Solik warned.

"Pfft! Firestick's don't kill, or does the glorious STG not know that? It's only the nerve endings, and I know when to stop so that he doesn't go into shock."

The salarian merely shook his head, and turned to the naked, bound man. Noticing that the human had relieved himself when Zo'or had stabbed him in the dick. Telling the human "Please spare yourself further pain and humiliation by cooperating. Now tell me: how many people did your group bring to batarian space?"

It took Peter a moment to catch his breath, but once he did he went on the offensive again. Saying to the salarian, "Millions. We are everywhere, and the Hegemony will be overthrown by this time tomorrow" Clark bluffed with false bravado. Glaring at Zo'or as he said "One of my buddies with probably come by and shove that sex toy up your ass."

"And then what? Is that the worst you can do?" Zo'or snarled, grabbing a small tub on one of the tables before pouring it's contents on Clark's legs. The ONI agent started screaming as the acid began eating away at his skin and muscle, the acid congealing with the blood, leaving the flesh exposed to the open air.

"YOU FUCKING FOUR EYED FREAK!" Clark screamed in pain and rage.

Wishing with all his heart that he had a weapon to strike down his tormentor. "When I get free, I'm going to carve out your eyeballs!"

Solik Blanca just stood in shock. Amazed at how quickly Zo'or had moved from merely inflicting pain to outright mutilation. Hating the fact that circumstances forced him to ally with such a bloodthirsty sadist.

"How many of you are there?" Zo'or asked again.

When Clark remained defiantly silent, the batarian grabbed another container of acid. Saying with a mock sigh, "Well if this is really what you want?"

"I DON'T KNOW!...I don't know...I'm just a low level grunt...they don't tell me that kind of thing!" Peter Clark admitted. Hating himself for his weakness, but terrified of getting splashed with acid again.

"Guess!" Zo'or hissed as he jabbed Clark in the torso with the firestick.

"Umm...a few hundred, maybe..." "Look, I'm just a damn field agent. We get told on a need to know basis! Compartmentalization, you ever heard of it?"

"What is your overall mission here?...Why are humans in the Hegemony at all?" Solik asked, reluctantly acknowledging Zo'or's brutish methods seemed to be working.

"To get rid of...people like him." Clark replied as looked (yet tried not to look) at Zo'or. Saying in almost pleading tones to Solik "were not trying to take batarian space away from you...just get rid of the Hegemony."

"So you can set up a client state in Council space" Solik thought aloud. His voice suddenly cold and unsympathetic.

"How the hell am I supposed to know? The only thing I got told was that we're going to take it down from the inside out. After that, I don't give a damn."

"Just following orders right...well I can respect that." Zo'or said cheerfully as he gently touched the firestick to one of Clark's testicles.

Peter screamed so loudly in agony it hurt Solik's ears. The ONI agent feeling as though Zo'or had scorched his balls. Howling in frustration "WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU I'M ANSWERING THE DAMN QUESTIONS!"

"Oh, I know. This is just something I like doing. A batarian can enjoy his job, after all."

"What can you tell us about your comrades immediate plans?" Solik asked, playing the 'good cop' just by virtue of not being an overeager sadist.

"Immediate?...the only thing I can think of is that one of the

Spartans is supposed to lead a raid on a military base in the Historic district, today or tomorrow." Peter admitted, honestly having little idea how much time he had spent in batarian custody.

Zo'or snarled, "You lie!" Ditching the firestick, he stabbed the agent in the shoulder with an acid-gat. A device that released a slow-acting acid once inside a body. It only lasted as long as the gat was impaled, but it caused serious pain, going in and coming out. It was rarely used as it left a disfiguring mark.

Grabbing ahold of the gat, Solik ripped it from Clark's shoulder and Zo'or's grasp. "What's the matter with you! What did he say to anger you like that!?"

"The military base in the Historic district, it's one of the most heavily fortified on the planet...nobody would dare attack it NOBODY!" his pride as a batarian soldier and loyal citizen of the Hegemony offended by the very idea.

"The Salarian Union probably would if we ever went to war with the Hegemony and I'm sure so would the turians and krogan...assuming an important facility will never been attacked only makes such a situation more likely." Solik retorted.

"I doubt these cowards have the balls or the guns to strike at such a target, but we'll let the higher ups know." Zo'or capitulated before turning his attention back to Clark. "Now thenâ€¦" He picked up a splicer, a nasty tool that worked under the victim's skin, leaving only internal marks. "Let's find out what else you in that pretty little head of yoursâ€¦"

-End of Graphic Scene-

Over the next few hours, Zo'or and Solik questioned Peter Clark over ONI tactics, equipment, and resources. Clark gave them a mixture of truth, lies, and outright guesses. The fact of the matter was, he was about as low ranking and inexperienced a field agent as the Office of Naval Intelligence had. So while he could supply them with a lot of general information, when it came to ONI secrets and insights into their most important operations, he was severely lacking. Nevertheless, the batarian and salarian pumped him for everything he knew.

"Now then, one last question. Who is John Doe?"

"Who?"

"John Doe. He seems to be a prominent figure in this terrorist organization of yours? Who is he? One of your political leaders?"

"John Doe...John Doeâ€¦" A muffled sound rumbled up from Clark. Thinking he was going to tell them, Solik stepped closer. Only to jump away as Clark started laughing maniacally. Solik and Zo'or actually had to repress a shudder at the noise. "Oh...you want me to tell you who John Doe is? Alright, I'll tell you."

"So, is he one of your political leaders? Or a military commander?"

"John Doe is...isn't he?" Clark, his mind breaking down, couldn't help but crack up. "He is everyone, and he is no one. A phantom...an apparition. Second cousin to Harvey the Rabbit. You're chasing after a ghost! John Doe doesn't exist except as a name!" Clark started cackling again.

"Shut up! Shut up!" Zo'or shouted. "You liar! Tell me who he is now! Where is he?!" Zo'or started beating on Clark, shutting him up as Clark's mad laugh was replaced by grunts and yells of pain.

Solik tried to stop the Batarian, but compared to the Batarian, he might as well been trying to stop a charging Krogan. "Stop! Stop!" Zo'or didn't stop. In desperation, Solik grabbed the firestick and jabbed Zo'or with it, bringing the beating to a screeching halt.

"Ahhhhhhh!.WHAT THE FUCK SOLIK!" Zo'or screamed as he moved away from the salarian.

"YOU'RE GOING TO KILL HIM YOU BRUTE!" the STG agent screamed back.

"NO I'M NOT HE'S FINE!" Zo'or argued.

"THEN WHY ISN'T HE MOVING?!" Solik demanded.

"He's just...". The batarian's voice trailed off as he saw that Peter Clark's body was completely motionless.

"You killed him." Solik said grimly.

"No, he's just playing dead, so we'll stop." Zo'or argued, as much to convince himself as the salarian. Clark not reacting at all when the batarian interrogator jabbed him with the firestick. "C'mon! Stop acting and wake up!"

"He's dead Zo'or. And you've just destroyed the only real intelligence asset we had on the Office of Naval Intelligence." Solik continued coldly.

"He...he killed himself. Yes, that's what happened." Zo'or said desperately. "He had something, another implant we must not have found or something else".

Solik just shook his head. "I won't lie for you Zo'or Blanca. And even if I was willing, we both know that all these interrogations sessions are monitored so any valuable data is preserved. Your superiors are probably being informed of what you have done, even as we speak." Solik Gurji icily told the interrogator.

Military interrogator 1st Class Zo'or Blanca looked around desperately. Hoping that something that could save him would stand out. Knowing that his superiors wouldn't forget a failure of this magnitude. And that his superiors were all too likely to order one of his colleagues to torture HIM to death now.

As though it were some sort bad movie, three Hegemony soldiers entered the room. One immediately striking Zo'or with the butt of his gun, knocking out the interrogator, before his two cohorts grabbed

ahold of Zo'or's arms and began dragging him from the room.

Solik sighed as he watched the sadist be taken away. "At the very least, we have a lead on just where theres terrorists might strike next."

****APUFMKII****

The Historic District was the oldest part of Overseer City. It contained countless statues of state heroes and other historical monuments, the Supreme Senate building (where the official leaders of the Hegemony assembled to conduct state business), the Presidential Palace (where the Hegemony's nominal head of state lived), and many lavish homes belonging to the Hegemony's richest (and most well connected) citizens. Perhaps most importantly, Fortress Bythor was also in the Historic District. Bythor was the largest and most well known military base on Khar'Shan. Up until Datak Korra took over it had also functioned as the primary headquarters for the batarian military (but Korra decided that he wanted a more secure and less accessible HQ). It was a potent symbol of the power of the Hegemony and the strength of the batarian military.

Which is why the Rebellion wanted to attack it.

The attack itself was meant to be a simple raid. Kill a few guards, destroy a vehicle or two, throw some bombs around, and leave. The objective of the raid was simply to show that the rebels could get to the servants of the Hegemony anywhere (even a fortified location like Bythor). Rather than causing maximum damage or even killing any enemy VIPs.

But the Spartan leading the raid had a different thought in mind. Imagining the glory that could be his if he managed to fight his way through Fort Bythor and kill the general in command.

'Hell the High Admiral himself might be in there now...I could just kill him and pretty much wrap up Operation Spartacus here and now.' Deigo thought arrogantly.

Diego was leading a relatively formidable rebel group. Two dozen rebels, most of them armed with the heaviest weapons they could carry, and all of them with combat training and/or experience. Only four of them were batarians, the rest were all turians or krogan who had been enslaved as adults. United by their hatred of the Hegemony and desire for vengeance against it.

Under ideal conditions, a competent commander would have considered the overeagerness of those under their command. They would have compensated and had fallback options for a number of scenarios. Spartan Diego however, was far from being a commander of any sort, let alone a competent one.

Cocky as hell, it didn't help the fact that Diego was a lone wolf. Being inconsiderate of others was in his very nature, caution wasn't in his vocabulary. Which was why he was recklessly pushing forward deeper and deeper into the base, uncaring of the bodies and damage being left in his wake. "C'mon! Let's move it up!" He shouted, chucking a plasma grenade at a Hegemony vehicle, vaporizing half of it in a flare of plasma.

Behind the Spartan, spurred on by their commander's recklessness, charged forward. Even as some of their comrades died around them, they moved on. Firing grenade launchers, rocket launchers and the odd homemade weapon. Hegemony forces died in droves, not expecting heavy weapons usually reserved for light armor to be used against their infantry. As for Diego, he was displaying just why, despite everything about him, he was still a Spartan.

He flew across the battlefield. Dropping Hegemony troops left, right and center. When his first weapon had overheated, he simply threw it aside and grabbed a fallen one. Some, he grabbed before snapping their necks, or in some cases, literally ripping off their heads. When his shields fell, he dove for a Hegemony IFV, leaping onto the hatch. Ripping it off with barely an effort before dropping grenades and jumping back. The ensuing explosion and wreck giving him time to regenerate his shields. And for him, he was just getting started.

Unfortunately for Diego, his comrades weren't doing so well. Amongst the Hegemony soldiers scattered across the base, there were several of the Hegemony's WhiteGuard Elite, and had quickly realized that all but their heaviest weapons seemed to have no effect on the Spartan, in short order, ordering all of their forces without heavy weapons, (which amounted to most of the base's soldiers) to concentrate their fire on the slaves and ignore the Spartan. No one balked at the orders, knowing the WhiteGuard's reputation regarding insubordination.

A turian rebel screamed in pain as he was shot dozens of times in the torso, while a krogan comrade just old enough to be considered an adult was hit with by so much enemy fire his head simply ceased to exist. Rebels screamed, cursed, or a few instances broke down and called for their mothers as the batarian soldiers wiped them out. But their 'leader' Diego barely even noticed.

The Spartan continued to run ahead even as the last member of his team lay dying. Futilely calling calling to the Spartan for help. Realizing at the end that Diego was a far lesser man than John Doe (the one who had done the most to form the rebels image of Spartans).

Once his comrades were all dead, things rapidly changed for Diego. Even someone as arrogant as him noticed that he had suddenly become the enemy's only target. Wincing as a high power sniper slammed into his visor and knocking his head back. Craning his head, searching for the sniper, only to realize that his enemy had finally gotten their act together. In the time that he had recklessly pushed forward, deeper into enemy territory, instead of falling back as planned, gave his enemy time to respond. Time the Hegemony had taken advantage of.

Now it was no longer just infantry and WhiteGuard, but light armor vehicles and even tanks rolling in. Batarian State Arms manufactured drones and VI-controlled mechs closing in as well. Someone in command having finally remained all of their automated drone forces that had been gathering dust for years. The designs having been provided, according to rumor, by the Shadow Broker himself.

No one fired, not just yet. From above, in the relative safety of a gunship, a voice came over the mounted speakers. "SURRENDER AND YOU

WILL NOT BE HARMED BUT IF YOU CONTINUE TO RESIST LETHAL FORCE WILL BE USED."

Despite whatever most everyone else would consider to be suicidal odds, Diego just smirked, unseen by his enemies. "You ladies want to dance? Let's dance!" Drawing another two plasma grenades, he primed them before charging in the direction of the gunship. Seeing the Spartan charge, the gunship pilot screamed. "Open fire!" Hundreds of guns, from rifles and shotguns, to cannons and rockets fired en masse. But defying all odds, Diego managed to evade most of the fire. His shields taking the brunt of the rifle fire, but evading anything heavier than a sniper round. The grenades still primed in his hand, he threw one at another tank, sticking to it's cannon. In a blue flash, the plasma vaporized the tank, at the same time, igniting it's fuel tanks and killing any unfortunate enough to be too close. The second grenade, he threw at the gunship, but it's pilot, seeing just what had happened to the tank below pulled up. Narrowly avoiding the grenade, it stuck itself to a hapless Hegemony soldier, vaporizing him and eight of his cohorts before he could scream.

Seeing his soldiers being ripped to shreds, the commander started screaming, "Shoot him down! Shoot him down!"

Repeating the stunts from earlier, Diego mounted several more light armor vehicles, sometimes shoving a grenade inside before leaping off, others he left the panicking Hegemony forces fire on him, and the tank, before taking off. Sometimes running between infantry and mech groups, taking out his foes in an ironic display of friendly fire. Between pilfering enemy weapons from the dead as he ran by, and in a move of tactical brilliance, using his enemy's panic against him, the hundred or so Hegemony forces, were being whittled down.

Seeing his forces being wiped out to the last, the commander piloting the gunship began to panic. If he somehow survived this, and the human managed to escape, he would be the scapegoat, and everything would be pinned on him! With renewed fervor, he slammed down on the firing studs, the dirt and pavement flying up as the bullets hit. Diego began sprinting in an effort to stay out of the gunship's sights.

As he ran, Diego tried grabbing weapon after weapon, firing it at the gunship, until the trigger clicked on empty. But whatever he tried, the shields on the gunship took the brunt of the fire and barely flinched. Giving the Spartan a reprieve only when the guns had to cool down. As he ducked behind the remains of an armored vehicle, the gunship let its cannon cool, Diego patted his belt. "C'mon, C'mon. I got to have something left, somewhere." Stopping as he felt a bulge in one pocket. "Hello there!"

Above, the commander furiously tapped at his console as he tried to hasten the cooling process. The guns were pushed to their breaking point, even with all the cooling breaks. "To the Pit with this!" He said to himself, slamming a button on the console. The guns began spooling up again, despite being red hot, as their safety protocols were forcibly disengaged. "Die!"

Bullets began peppering the area, only for the commander to see the Spartan burst forward running towards one of the buildings. The pilot snarled as he followed, dirt and stone kicking into the air as he

missed.

"LOSER!" Diego yelled out joyously as he dodged enemy fire. Despising his enemies as weak and impotent. Feeling invulnerable, as though nothing could touch him. Reaching the building, he climbed it, deftly dodging fire before leaping off it. Midair, he pulled the pin of the M5 Thermite grenade, tossing it at the gunship.

Landing into one of it's intakes, the grenade ignited. Ferrous oxide and aluminum igniting in a chemical reaction, it burned at over two thousand degrees celsius, eating through the hull, the engines and everything else in its path until it hit the ground.

Seeing the gunship beginning to spiral out of control, the Spartan began laughing. "WHAT YOU GONNA DO WHAT YOU GONNA DO!" Diego catcalled the enemy. Inside the gunship, it's pilot desperately tried to regain control, then he saw the Spartan. Laughing at him. Taunting him. In a fit of rage and bloodlust, he abandoned trying to land.

The Spartan was still laughing aloud, even as the gunship turned and began moving toward him. Not moving, not realizing, until it was too late. Finally seeing for what it was, Diego turned, to run. Inside, the pilot managed to whisper, "For the Hegemony", just before the gunship itself rammed into the Spartan. Smoke, flame, dirt and debris flew into the air from the impact.

Diego didn't even have time to realize what was going on before the gunship crushed him. Tons of steel, plastic, and ceramic, landing on top of him at speeds approaching the sound barrier. The Spartan's armor and body wasn't simply destroyed, they were pulverized.

Moments later the fuel inside the gunship exploded, blackening everything within the crater.

Around the site, Hegemony forces closed in, intent on claiming their prize.

Author's Note:

aDarkOne here.

Many of you are probably angry at how easily Spartans were taken down this chapter.

Good.

Its impossible to please everyone all the time, so I settle for pissing off each group some of the time :)

I am sure Mass Effect fans will be angry with me before this is through too.

On a more serious note, I don't want to give away too many spoilers, but I will say one thing to describe the next chapter.

Counterattack.

P.S. I find nothing more boring than an untouchable protagonist. In our story Spartans are tough, but they can still die. So can warlords, mercenaries, CEOs, generals, and even humble ditch diggers. And that is the way it should be in a (good) war story.

Follower38:

Yeah, I know many of you will argue that some of this is not possible, to most of you, I would love to scream PLOT MAGIC. But no, we did try to reasons as to most everything here. If you still feel that something is not right, please, leave it in a review with your reason. And by reason, I mean something other than, "Oh this is bullshit! Spartans are OP AS FUCK! Asari can't do shit against them!" If you could actually provide a decent reason, I will listen. Otherwise, all flames will be used to roast burgers and marshmallows. Seriously though, Spartans are not invincible. Google the Spartan-II program. See how many Spartan-IIs there were after the augmentation, and how many are still alive prior to Halo 1. There is a considerable difference. I said once before, how I plan on break the mold and the rules when it came to this crossover. As you can all see, I did kill off Diego, but not before he caused a considerable amount of damage. Spartans can and will die. But they will not be pushovers. Kelly was beaten back only by two dozen, highly trained, elite and veteran Asari commandos, that was after falling down two stories, through sewers and concrete. And having to fight upside down. And the worst of her injuries being a bullet hole here and there.

If anyone has ideas for the story, tech, plot, characters, etc. Please, PM them to me. Especially tech ideas. If you anything, send them. And maybe, youll see them in the story. The more detailed it is, the better your chances.

22. Shadow War: Retaliation and Retribution

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk II

"There is always a sudden shift in the rules of warfare, with every war. Each time, it can be attributed to a single new technology, strategy or weapon. Many times a combination of all three. From the conical bullet of the 19th century, to the inception of tank warfare and blitzkrieg in the 20th, and faster-than-light travel in the 22nd. One must learn to adapt to these changes, before they can begin to take their toll."

-Commander Jacob Keyes, during his time as a teacher at the OCS on Luna during the Great War.

Chapter 22

Shadow War: Retaliation and Retribution

Datak Korra was very disciplined old soldier. He was certainly not given to excessive shows of emotion either. Nevertheless, a genuine smile appeared on his face when he found out that his people had managed to take down a Spartan.

"And what damage did our own forces suffer?" the high admiral asked.

The general in command of Fortress Bythor was suddenly glad that he was delivering this report over secure lines (rather than in person). Knowing how ruthlessly the high admiral dealt with perceived failure or incompetence as he admitted, "We lost a lot of personnel and vehicles sir."

"Numbers?"

"Approximately two hundred soldiers killed, and half again more injured. So far, we've counted eighty mechs destroyed along with twenty-five light armored vehicles and one gunship." The general reported. "That's not including the other damages we've suffered so far sir."

Datak nodded appreciatively. Quite honestly, he had expected for those numbers to be twice what they were.

"There were other rebels with him but...most of the damage was inflicted by the Spartan itself." The general continued. Since Datak had learned on the human's involvement, he had given all of the major military commanders a crash course in human military and terms, chief among them, the elite Spartans first seen kidnapping the Citadel Council.

"And the body? Did your teams manage to recover anything?"

"Yes, but its pretty mangled sir. Frankly, I doubt we could even convince anybody it was even human at this point without a DNA analysis." the general explained.

He waved the general off. "That's of little importance, what of the armor itself? What is its status?"

"It was crushed as well, sir. It appears that it was damaged beyond repair, but we have recovered it as per your orders, sir."

"Let our boys in R&D figure that out. I want to you ship everything, including the body, to the Castle Facility." Korra commanded.

The general nodded in understanding. The Castle Facility was one of the military's top R&D facilities, located deep within one of Khar'Shan's mountains, and was the premiere R&D facility of the entire Hegemony, so it made sense to send everything there.

"As you wish, sir."

"And make sure to keep this quiet. I don't want anyone, or anything, getting wind of this. If anything happens to that armor, I am holding you personally responsible, general." Korra said just before hanging up.

Despite being in his private office, which was the most secure part of the high admiral's underground headquarters, Datak Korra felt uneasy. It was disturbing how much damage one unsupported Spartan had been able to inflict on his forces. He had calculated the losses based on the estimate that it would be more than a single Spartan. Especially considering the fact that he had no idea how many human super soldiers there really were.

He could scarcely imagine the thought of more of these Spartans on the battlefield. If just one could cause this many losses, than how much could a squad of them cause? Or even an army? He dreaded the potential carnage that could result.

"These humans, they've changed galactic warfare in way they don't realize. Or perhaps they do. Those fools on the Citadel certainly have not. Ordinary batarians are no longer enough, not with these _Spartans_. We need something more..." Korra thought as he tapped a few commands on his terminal. A video popping up on screen, showing a satellite view of the Spartan as utterly wrecked all those in it's path. "Perhaps...we already doâ€|"

Creating super soldiers was certainly not a new idea in the Hegemony. But it had never seemed worth the effort or investment. Ordinary soldiers were more than enough to deal with most of the regime's enemies. While well trained and equipped, special forces could generally handle the rest. But the advent of these humans changed everything.

With the issuing of a few orders, Datak Korra began rerouting funding from several sources to a project for creating super soldiers that had initially been rejected. Said program had been decommissioned in all but name for ages. Those involved receiving little more than token funds to achieve their work. He was hoping that data from the Spartan corpse and his equipment would give the program the edge it needed. But was determined to move forward was either that, or bend over to the humans. And Datak, was never one to surrender.

****APUFMKII****

Far from Datak's office, the Rebellion was regrouping. "By the goddess, how did they find us?" Cara all but shouted, a sentiment shared by the other rebels present. "For months we've been fighting the Hegemony, and they couldn't find us if we were their neighbors! And now, we're running?" Admittedly, her words were less in anger, and more in fear.

"Well human?" Cara suddenly focusing on John. "Do you have any answers?" Now fear was slowly being replaced by anger. "Do you!" Other rebels began clamoring for answers as well.

Jella placed a hand on her lover. "Cara, love, calm down." She said, "John already told us, he doesn't know either that. Only that someone was attacking us."

"And I don't." Everyone's attention now focused on the Spartan. "The only thing I do know is, that whomever they are, are not the Hegemony's normal forces, or even their special forces. I've searched the safehouses of the lost cells, and everything points to some sort of special forces from outside the Hegemony being involved."

"And how would you know that?" Someone shouted. "I've been there myself, and I didn't find nothing!"

"Then you weren't looking hard enough. The doors were breached with a breaching charge, not brute force. And there were virtually no signs of a firefight, meaning that whoever breached the safe houses, were fast enough to take everyone down before they could realize what was

going on. The lack of bodies meaning that they were probably taken prisoner."

"And that means we have to abandon and clear out every location those cells knew." Jella realized, getting a nod from John. "And let guess; until we figure out just what's going on, we have to put a hold on everything?" Her answer was another nod.

Jella turned back to the others. "Alright, you heard him then. Start figuring out which locations could be compromised. Secure what's inside if you think you can, otherwise, tell all the other cells to avoid them." As the rebels began to move to follow her orders, she added, "If you think you can leave any little presents, for any would be guests, do so."

While most gave an affirmative answer, one voice said, "So what, that's it then?" Drawing everyone's attention was a young turian, just old enough that back in turian space, he would have joined the military for his mandatory service. "We're just supposed to run and hide from them? I thought you people were fighters, not cowards. I-" He paused as dull thumps and shouts could be heard from the door, drawing everyone's attention.

A figure dressed in heavy robes burst into the barn functioning as their temporary headquarters. Walking in an almost drunken fashion until she sat down in a nearby (wooden) chair. Which promptly collapsed under her weight and left her on her ass.

Before anyone could move, John was already by her side, having recognized her at the last moment. Pulling the hood of the robe off revealed the, to him, familiar polarized faceplate. "Kelly."

The female Spartan gave him the Spartan Smile, a quick swipe across his faceplate. "Hey John. Reporting for Debriefing." She sounded more exhausted than injured, he thought to himself. A quick check of her suit's biological functions monitor supported that. Aside from a few bullet holes and an unusual amount of strain on her nervous systems, she was fine. Though the latter did concern him.

"What happened?" John Doe asked was'nt an easy feat to damage a Spartan's armor, let alone injury them. And Kelly, being the fastest of Spartans, couldn't be hit unless she allowed you to.

"We've got problems. It's not just the Hegemony anymore we're fighting. The Council's sent reinforcements." With help from John, she managed to stand again, though she was leaning against him.

"We've known that for a while." John was confused. "HIGHCOM told us in the last communique. In fact, it's been some time since they were scheduled to arrive."

"Yeah, but they didn't realize they weren't just sending grunts." Kelly grunted, "They've been here John, we just didn't realize it."

The Spartan Commander's eyes widened by a hair. "Special Forces?" Kelly confirmed it. "That's who did this to you?"

"Yeah, asari. twenty-plus. Elite."

"And we have to assume that the other Councilors sent their own forces as well." John surmised. "How did they manage to get the drop on you?"

"They actually weakened the floor under where I was standing. Sent me through two sublevels, and they already had me surrounded by the time I hit the ground." Kelly explained to the best of her ability. "But John, there's something else we need to tell the others. I'll let you know later."

John nodded before focusing on the others. "I assume all of you heard that then?"

All of them numbly answered yes. And were staring at the cloaked Spartan leaning against her commanding officer. The stories told about the elite forces of the Council races were both equally awe inspiring, and terrifying to those who heard them.

The turians, with their biotic Cabals and Blackwatch forces. Able to pacify and seize an entire pirate asteroid base, without taking any casualties.

The Salarians, with their Special Tasks Group, using newer and exotic weapons and technology to carry out the job. Even going so far as to use biological and chemical weapons.

The Krogan with their Kalros Legion, Krogan of exceptional build, both in mind and body. Their shock value on the battlefield was unparalleled.

And the asari commandos, able to wipe out entire platoons with their biotics alone. Centuries of experience and training, they were thought to be unkillable. Least not without heavy weapons or ground support.

And the human Spartan had just claimed to kill almost twenty of them. Quite frankly, those present weren't sure whether to be afraid of the fact that Council Special Forces were present, or if they should pity them.

We need to strike back against these commandos. Jella, Cara, you're in charge of reorganizing the cells. I'll be taking charge of the counter-operations. The Rebellion is far from beaten, and it's time we showed them that we will not be so easily beaten."

As Cara and Jella began giving out orders in accordance with John's orders, John pulled Kelly away, moving into John's temporary quarters before establishing a private comm. link between themselves. "Kelly, is this related to what happened to you with those asari?"

"Yes. John, there's no easy way to say this, but their biotics, they're more effective than we realized. The fall shattered my shields, and I didn't have a chance to let them recharge. The armor stopped their gunfire and most of their biotics but...John, one of them hit me with something, it bypassed my armor completely. My brain felt like it was being burned by plasma, my armor began spasming; I didn't have control of it. I nearly ripped my own arm out of it's socket because of it. The only reason I'm still alive is because of the rebels who were supposed to rendezvous with me." Kelly

confessed.

The knowledge hit John Doe heavily. The Council Races had more biotics than humanity had people. When the Spartans had first faced off against these biotics, they had classified them as a minor threat, any biotics attacks splashing against their shields if they managed to fire off any. But if they could bypass the armor entirely once their shields were down...it was a terrifying prospect. "We need to inform the others, and HIGHCOM."

'And mother as well.' He thought to himself.

Kelly had known John long enough to get a sense of just how worried he was. So she said in reassurance "I killed dozens of them before they were able to do any real damage John. Unless the asari actually start building an army and training them in anti-Spartan tactics, and whatever it was that hit me, we probably have nothing to worry about."

"I suppose you're right." John Doe admitted, because he certainly couldn't see that happening anytime soon.

****APUFMKII****

Castle Facility, the name of the Hegemony's premiere Research and Development Facility for all things alien. Not to mention the starting location for many of its black projects. Completely off the books, with the exception of those who worked there and a select few outside them, the Castle Facility did not exist.

Which was why Datak had sent what had been salvaged from the Spartan's corpse, both gear and the body itself, to Castle Facility. It was as secure as Batarian territory could get, not including Datak's private bunker of course. Even in a facility as secret as Castle, there were locations within it that were blacked out on designs and known only to a select few.

Which was where Diego's body and gear had been sent and were now lying on a table. "Fascinatingâ€|these humans are, admittedly, ingenious." A Hegemony scientist muttered to himself as he ran his omnitool across a bone that had remained intact. "A Carbide Ceramic layer grafted to the calcium so as to make them unbreakable. But still porous enough to allow normal body functions. Well, assuming that these human bodies work like we do."

The scientist was just one of over a dozen others analyzing the salvage that was lying on the table. Some, like this particular one was, were studying the body itself and whatever oddities they found. Others were examining the suit itself, what was left of it at any rate. The body had been removed from the armor and underlayer suit as much as they could. Some portions however the armor and suit had melted and fused with the flesh. Or the flesh had burned to ash with the armor portion melting into unrecognizable slag. And some rare sections had come out relatively unscathed. The majority of it however, had been crumpled by the impact with the gunship. The largest parts to have remained mostly intact were the head and helmet, the back of the upper torso armor and the lower section of a leg. And a few others were trying to make sense of the slagged and heat-fused components to try and make sense of it.

All of them taking meticulous notes and deep-layer scans of every single piece that they touched, and even what they had not. After all, it was not worth running the risk of punishment for failing to report absolutely everything they had learned.

What none of them realized however, was that the batarian in question was getting a real-time feed and updates from the facility. Having a direct link to everything in the darkened section, with him being the only one who knew about his link.

Datak was not someone to leave any loose ends lying around.

As he was reading the notes and data coming in, he had to agree, these humans were incredibly inventive. The body itself may more or less have been turned to paste, but still, they were learning from it. From the suit alone, they had found a potential fusion reactor small enough to fit within a standard hardsuit. Hardsuits, which were the name of the bodyarmor consisting of an underlayer bodysuit with external plates of hard synthetic materials and ceramic, most which possessed a shield generator and mechanical aid to reduce the felt weight, were all battery powered. Then there was the muscle-like fibrous material making up the human bodysuit, which possibly augmented the user's strength, least that was the assumption, and the strange gel-layer beneath it, which so far they had not found a purpose to. Though Datak surmised it had something to do with comfort to some extent, considering it's proximity to the skin layer.

Then of course, there was the body itself. It in of itself was proof that the humans were either far more intelligent than anyone had realized, or that they were entirely immoral.

Korra was a not a doctor or scientist, but nevertheless, he was very intelligent, well informed, and had developed a very 'hands on' understanding of just how much punishment flesh could endure. Based on what the researchers had uncovered so far, these humans, assuming the one that they had killed was typical for their race, had undergone extensive modification. So extensive that it signified that the humans either had much more advanced medical technology, or that they were willing to (most likely) maim and kill a large percentage of potential Spartans just to create a few 'good' ones.

And based on what they had found, even without the armor, these humans could take half as much punishment from a krogan before falling. Considering the resistance of the other races compared to krogans, that was considerable.

Datak knew that such a brute force approach would probably be necessary if the Hegemony were going to create their own super soldiers in a relatively short amount of time. But that was a price he was more than willing to pay.

The Hegemony certainly had enough 'disposable' people to use in such experiments. And Korra couldn't think of a better way to spend a slave's life than to literally create fitter masters.

But those were plans for the future. At the moment, Korra was reviewing footage that some batarian troops had gotten ahold of. They had found it when they had gone searching for the asari commando team that had forgotten to report in. Three times. He was the only one who knew where all of them were based, and so had dispatched a squad to

find out.

What they had found, was nothing than a scene of total carnage.. Many of the bodies were so badly burned and mangled that DNA testing was required just to confirm that they had been asari. Others were riddled with bullets, one was even decapitated, and at least one corpse had been reduced to little more than a smear on the wall. In many cases their equipment was just as badly damaged, but the batarian soldiers had still been able to recover some useful data.

And it was equally enlightening, as it was disturbing. The video quality was military standard, which meant utterly terrible, but more than enough for Korra. It showed the commandos battle against the Spartan that had ambushed them in all its gory detail.

Korra could not deny though, the way the Spartan had ambushed the asari Commandos was nothing short of tactical genius. If a bit ungraceful in execution. Using their own body weight for breakthrough that much concrete, just to get the drop on their targets. Korra gave credit where it was due.

Still, the fact remained that the asari had almost won. Using their biotics to directly attack the nervous system of their human foe. Who had only escaped due to reinforcements arriving in the nick of time. Datak was genuinely curious as to whether or not the Spartan had been able to recover from what the commandos had done to him or her, and regretted that he would probably never know.

What was frightening however, was the relative ease it had dispatched a good portion of the commandos before it had been hit by that Reave. Compared to the Spartan they had recovered, the one in the video was above and beyond it. In skill, ability and size. The one in the video was easily a full head taller than the other. "But why such a difference?" He pondered. "An Elite within the elite, perhaps?" Such a possibility wasn't too far out of the question. Even in the Hegemony's WhiteGuard, there were elite units a cut above the rest, and individual soldiers who embodied even higher standards.

Of course that begged the question, how many of these upper elites were there? Shaking the thought from his mind, Korra prepared to send the footage to the other asari commandos sent by the Council. Hopefully learning that their biotics could be so effective against Spartans would help them adjust their future tactics. If nothing else, the high admiral thought that knowing that Citadel ground troops could take down the super soldiers would raise the morale of everybody who had to fight them.

****APUFMKII****

The STG team had been observing the rebel cell for over a day now. Tracking their movements, counting their numbers, and studying their defenses. Now, finally that it was dark as the night would get, they moved. The lack of maintenance and proper lighting in the slums making their job that much easier.

Up above and across the street, snipers and spotters were perched in their nests, keeping an eye on the windows and streets. If there any surprises lying in wait, they'd find them. As far as the STG team were concerned, this was just another raid. One of dozens they've

already planned and executed earlier, in similar locales.

The team leader, Ozik Cadok, watched as one of his team placed a breaching charge against the door. His HUD lighting up with green winks as the other team confirmed their own charges being placed. "All teams, confirm position." The radio clicking as they called in.

"Sniper One, in position."

"Sniper Two in position."

"Team Two in position."

"Sniper Three in, what the?"

Frowning, Cadok looked towards the general location of the third sniper nest. "Sniper Three, what's the problem?"

The sniper in question was looking at his spotter, trying to confirm what he just saw. Only for him to shrug. Going back to his rifle, he answered, "Sorry boss. Just something wrong with the scope. It looked like one of the windows fizzled for a second or something."

"Fizzled?"

"The window was covered in static, but it must have been the scope."

Cadok frowned. He'd been having strange feelings about this raid, but had passed it off as nothing more than just the slums having their effect on him. "All teams get ready." He pulled the small detonator from a hip pouch. "Firing breach charges in 3, 2, 1. Breaching!" Slamming a thumb on the detonator, the doors exploded inward. "Flares!" On cue, two flare grenades were thrown in. Detonating with a bright flash of light and a thunderous STG teams charging in as soon as the grenades detonated. "Go, go, go!"

Weapons raised, the STG strafed the room finding, nothing? As the rush from the door breach faded, the STG found themselves looking into an empty room. Frowning, Ozik looked around the room, trying to understand what was going on. The place didn't look abandoned. If anything, it looked lived in. His eyes widened in realization, calling up the sniper teams on the radio. "Nests, report in! What do you see?"

"Sniper Three. Sir, we got nothing. No reaction, no changes. They're just there."

"Sniper Two here. Same here sir, we got nothing."

Frowning at the lack of response, Cadok pressured. "Sniper One, what's your situation?" Silence. "Sniper One, respond." No answer. "Snipers Two and Three, search One's position, what's going on?"

Sniper Three's alarm was plain to hear as he shouted. "Sniper One is gone! I repeat Sniper One is down! Th-" The radio didn't even squelch as it cut off.

"Two and Three, what's happening?!"

This time it was Two's panicked voice that filled the radio. "They're inside, they're insi-"

Cadok, realizing just exactly what was going on, ordered, "Fall back! Everyone fall back!" As the teams turned toward where they had come from, they all froze as the hum and crackling of fading cloaks could be heard. Turning their heads to the source, they came face to face with a familiar visor. A large, triple-barreled rifle aimed at Cadok's head. Flanking the STG, blocking the doors, two more Spartans stood. One of them holding a massive double-barreled hand cannon that looked like small artillery pieces to the much smaller salarians. The other holding a regular human rifle. The human super soldiers seemed to ominously loom over the STG operatives in that brief moment after they realized the Spartans were there but before the humans attacked.

Unfortunately for the STG agents, that moment couldn't last. As John and Ozik stared each other down, the Spartan ordered. "Take them." Two thunderous cracks split the air as twin .500 caliber rounds exploded from the pistol, tearing through three salarians with ease. The other cut loose with his rifle, precision fire withering away the shields of one salarian, then perforating his body. John doing the same with his own.

But the STG weren't known as elite for nothing.

The remaining seven covert operatives quickly realized that conventional tactics wouldn't work. So they fired a quick drying adhesive (designed to immobilize targets without killing them) from their omni-tools at the feet of the Spartan. Gluing the humans feet to the floor as the STG agents tried to retreat.

Under normal circumstances, the adhesive wouldn't have slowed down, let alone stopped a Spartan, but the STG had since learned from their skirmish on the Citadel. Only John managed to free himself, grabbing Ozik as he tried to run before throwing him against a wall, knocking the STG leader out cold. The other Spartans couldn't free themselves, and one was forced to lock their armor; making their shields impenetrable but unable to move as the STG focused their fire on him. Skirting around him and running out the door. Still, the handcannon wielder emptied the cylinder, splitting a salarian in two and destroying the arm of another before being forced into armor lock as well as they fired glowing blobs at them. And not a moment too soon as they soon exploded with enough force to rival a plasma grenade. As the cloud from the explosion dissipated, the Spartan was still there, if a little scorched: the near-invincibility of the armor-lock minimizing the damage to almost nothing.

The surviving STG skirting around the Spartan, only for half of the survivors to be cut down by John before they were out the door. Without any hurry in his step, he walked to each of the Spartan-IVs, before ripping the adhesive off them.

The few salarians who made it out the door were killed by rebel snipers before they could make it very far. While the within building, Ozik Cadok slowly regained consciousness. Only to realize that he was surrounded by enemy super soldiers. Wondering if he would

have been better off if the blow to the head had killed him.

****APUFMKII****

"We...have seriously underestimated these terroristsâ€|" STG Captain Kirrahe grudgingly admitted.

"That's understating the situation." Nyreen Kandros, temporary commander of the Turian Forces. She had not wanted to be sent here, but as one of the few biotic turians the Hierarchy had under their command, not to mention how she had proven herself against the humans during the short Council-UNSC War, they had sent her, along with many others who had fought the humans, to Khar'shan. Kandros especially, since her command was one of the few, perhaps only, unit to have successfully brought down a human exo-suit. "We lost almost the entire contingent of asari Commandos sent with us, including their commander."

"That's not including all the intel they might have gotten from them." Urdnot Wreav, who was in command of the krogan forces. Wreav, who had once been driven by his love of war and battle, had mellowed since the conflict with the humans. Being the only survivor of an entire battalion of krogan tends to do that.

The three special forces commanders were meeting inside a turian Hypori-class frigate, provided by the Hierarchy, that was serving as their unified base of operations. Each of them had set up multiple outposts planetside, for their own forces. Along with their own vessels. And this was the first time they had meet like this since their first meeting with Datak Korra.

Nyreen nodded in agreement. "True, but what I'm wondering is how?" When she got strange looks from her peers, she elaborated, "What I mean is, how did they know where to look for them?"

They were all looking at a three dimensional representation of where the asari had set up their underground base, all the way up to the surface. It was, based on the data they had, repeating the events of that day. Currently, it was paused, with the Spartan on the surface, ready to punch a hole in the weakened ground. Below, the asari were milling around, finalizing their hidden camp in the sewers. Directly beneath the Spartan. "Look at this." Nyreen expanded the image, focusing on the hole that the Spartan was about to create. "This is the first time we've seen any humans in the area, and it knows just where to go to ambush them?" The image rotated, showing that the Spartan was indeed perfectly positioned to land right in the midst of the asari.

"I'm not entirely sure this was an ambush." Before anyone could ask, he forwarded the display, pausing with the Spartan's landing. "Look, when it hit bottom, it was on its back, not on it's feet."

Kirrahe rotated and replayed the scene several times. "Hmm, I don't think that's the case. It may have simply misjudged how weak the ground really was, and was surprised at how easily it broke." Letting it play again, he paused, just as the first of the Commandos died at the hands of the Spartan. "Look how it moved, the speed, the determination. That is not a knee jerk reaction, that is planned. Deliberate."

Wreav rumbled as he had to admit, the salarian had it right. Seeing the Spartan in action, it didn't seem like it had fumbled around trying to fight, but was following a predetermined plan.

"Still, we need to figure out how they found out, and make sure they don't do it again." Wreav pointed out.

The others nodded in agreement. "At the very least, we learned some valuable lessons from this." Nyreen began manipulating the controls again making the display change, zooming in on the Spartan. Showing the moment the Spartan was pulled off the ground and held aloft by biotics as it was being pummeled by the commandos. "Even with the thing's spirit's be damned shields down, their weapons couldn't penetrate the armor." They could clearly see the armor stopping the rounds cold and in some cases actually bouncing off. Glowing emblems on some of the asari weapons showing they were using armor piercing rounds. "If that's what happens with asari commando weapons, I don't want to think how badly standard issue weapons would fare." Since the Council's kidnapping during the UNSC's first visit to the Citadel, every Specials Forces group in Citadel Space had gone over every single video and piece of data relating to the Spartans and their capabilities. What had attracted the attention of many, had been the personal shields of the Spartans. Specifically, how powerful those shields were. Despite their best efforts, not once had they managed to penetrate those shields. Those used by non-Spartan troops had been successfully breached though. Sure the Spartans had displayed basic tactics, but still.

"Maybe our gear can fare better." Wreav suggested. "A lot of our weapons are designed to penetrate our shields, armor and hides in a single blow. If those don't work, we got weapons designed just to kill Thresher Maws."

"The STG also has experimental weapons of our own." Kirrahe added. "I will be forwarding this to my superiors and hopefully do some good."

"The Hierarchy has since been working on harder hitting weapons since Palaven. The question is, will the Asari and their Tevos Initiative provide anything viable." Nyreen, and indeed many in the special forces, and indeed the armed forces in general, were skeptic about this new so called Tevos Initiative actually producing anything combat effective. The asari commandos were considered to be elite, and so were their Justicars, but the asari had not had been involved in any major military action since the Rachni Wars. They had barely gotten involved in the UNSC-Citadel War. "At least we've learned something that's effective against these things."

They had all been surprised when the Spartan had almost been brought to her knees. The asari commander, seeing that none of their weapons were having effect, had attacked its nervous system directly with her biotics. Seeing the Spartan stop fighting and its limbs spasm had been a shock to them all. It had even appeared that the commandos had won, until they had been gunned down from above by rappelling terrorist forces.

"How many commandos are left?" Wreav asked, wanting to see if the asari commandos could finish the job under the right circumstances."

Two...they were investigating a possible terrorist cell when the rest of their squad got wiped out." Nyreen explained.

"So why aren't they here with us?" Wreav complained.

"They're waiting for reinforcements and further orders." Captain Kirrahe replied. The contempt in his voice obvious.

While strict discipline and adherence to orders was vital for regular troops, the STG captain thought that special forces should have more independence and initiative. Special forces who couldn't think on their feet were just regular soldiers with better equipment, in Kirrahe's opinion.

"So now what?" Nyreen asked irritably.

"Now we set a trap. If I understand the Spartans and their rebel followers as well as I think I do, they will try to seize the Spartan corpse and its equipment back from the batarians. So I propose that we let them think they have a chance to." Kirrahe announced.

Nyreen looked at the salarian leader dubiously, not eager to force another confrontation with the Spartans. But Wreav just laughed. Telling the captain. "Heh heh, I KNEW you had a quad Kirrahe."

"Shouldn't we wait for the commandos' reinforcements to get here first?" Nyreen asked critically.

"No, the more time the rebellion has to dig in, the stronger it will become. The Hegemony has become too adept at making its own people hate it, and these terrorist's are capitalizing on that. Besides, since we don't know HOW the humans are smuggling themselves into batarian territory, the Spartans could get more reinforcements at any time. Worse, without us knowing." Kirrahe firmly replied.

"We still have to inform the Council though." Nyreen pointed out. "Intelligence is half of any war after all. And we are starving for it."

"Yes, after this mission but not before. Human technology is more advanced than ours, so they might be able to listen in to even encrypted communications." Kirrahe explained. "If we have to, we can leave a dead drop if we fail."

Wreav grunted softly as an idea began to take form in his mind. Many people (including some krogan) simply dismissed the battlemaster as a brute. But he hadn't lived so long without learning a few tricks. Something Wreav demonstrated as he said "Then why don't we use that? If they're gonna listen to our communications anyway, let's tell them what we want to hear."

"You mean to bait them?"

Wreav nodded. "We make plans involving the armor, make it as enticing as possible for them to recover it. And when they make their move." His hand suddenly wrapped into a fist. "We close the knot."

"We'll need to coordinate with Korra to make this work." Nyreen said

distastefully.

"And we'll need him to allow us to use the actual armor." Kirrahe added. "If they even suspect the armor and body are fake, even for a moment, the plan will be a waste."

Wreav sighed and said, "If he gives you grief about it I'll ask my brother to talk to him."

The krogan didn't like using his connections. Relying on family to help him, made him feel young and weak again. Nevertheless, being the only surviving brood brother of Councilor Wrex was undeniably useful at times.

"You do realize that if we fail here, it could end all our careers? This is the first Spartan corpse and equipment anybody in Council space has gotten their hands on." Nyreen said warningly.

"We're planning on deliberately provoking a fight with Spartans. If we fail, we'll probably be DEAD, so I'm not too worried about my rep." Wreav replied with a shrug.

****APUFMKII****

The rebels interrogation of Ozik Cadok had been brief. Mainly because the salarian STG agent had died shortly after it began. And no one was quite sure why.

"Are you SURE you didn't hit him too hard" John Doe asked Sarah Palmer.

The Spartan-IV shook her head. "I don't think so. It wasn't like I was trying to break anything."

"Perhaps he was equipped with a suicide capsule, like most of ONI's field agents." John guessed aloud. "Either way, we've lost our information source on their special forces here."

"Not quite...we still have all his equipment including the communications gear" Kelly added.

Despite the fact that Jella Korrigan officially led the Rebellion, she not been invited to (or even informed of) this meeting. This was about Spartan matters. Specifically what to do about Spartan technology falling into enemy hands. So only the Spartans were in ramshackle room functioning as their meeting place.

"That's true," Palmer admitted, "But's its not like it'll be of much help finding out where the rest of them are. Or what their plans are. They'll probably have already changed their encryption scheme already."

"They might not assume that their colleague was captured." Another Spartan-IV pointed out, Demenux Rivers. "We didn't leave all of their corpses intact. So they might think he's dead." Demenux had been part of the ambush at the safe house. "I saw the damage Palmer's hand cannon had done to the Salarians; literally tore them to pieces." Said Spartan absentmindedly touched the KG OS .50x.50 revolver attached to her thigh armor. "That wasn't including how we had piled the bodies and then burned them with thermite. Leaving almost nothing of

the bodies."

"I can actually confirm that; they do think he's dead." Kelly didn't falter as everyone's attention was suddenly focused on her. "I'm listening to their communiques right now, and one of messages I intercepted with the STG gear. The batarians are planning on moving Diego's corpse and equipment from its current location to a heavily defended secret R&D facility in deep space."

"It that's true, then that just makes taking it back a lot easier." Palmer pursed her lips together, as she continued. "But why are they talking about this on the Salarians' channels? Are they trying to bait us?"

Kelly shook her head. "It's not, the batarians are using their own channels. They're also using the STG's encryption. That's why I heard about it." Before Palmer could speak, Kelly explained, "The STG's encryption are superior to anything the other races may have. Far superior."

"Assuming the data is as good it appears, our best option would be to recover the equipment and corpse when they move it. Recovering it afterwards isn't feasible since we lack any of our space based assets in this Operation." John Doe stated.

There was an awkward silence for a moment. None of them liked being reminded that Spartacus was an 'off the books' Operation. Therefore they couldn't count on the support they had received from the military during the Great War. Forcing them to relying on the locals for support. They didn't even have access to the Spartan Arsenal weapons except for the smaller ones, like Palmer's revolver.

"We'll need something to distract the Hegemony while we're doing this. Something that's going to occupy most, if not all their forces close by to wherever we execute this job." Palmer pointed out. She snapped her fingers. "Why not get that little pet of yours, Kerrigan or whatever her name is, to do that for us. Launch a dozen or so attacks, that'll occupy the batarians easily enough." Palmer's disdain and apathy for the Rebellion leader was clear in her tone. Like many of her kind, being an ex-ODST, she cared little for aliens, unless it was killing them.

"Her name is Korragan." John added stiffly.

Although he was loyal to humanity and the UNSC first and foremost, and had his own nightmarish experience and memories from the Great War, John had come to, if not care about, then at least respect Jella and many of the other rebels during his time in batarian space. He had been told (and believed) that Operation Spartacus would make things better for them. But sometimes the attitude of his fellow humans (even Spartans) made him wonder if he was just lying to himself (and by extension, all the rebels).

"Kerrigan, Korragan, whatever the four-eye's name is, she's our best option to create as large a window for the recovery operation. Will she do it?"

"Yes she will, because she trusts us...something you should keep in mind before speaking of our allies with such obvious contempt." John answered icily.

Palmer gulped down her comment about allies at, what she remembered to be, her commanding officer's tone. She had forgotten that compared to the seven foot behemoth before her, she was not his friend or even his equal. Recalling for a month how her CO had single-handedly, out of armor, wiped the floor with her and the other Spartans of the first graduating class. When John asked, "Is that understood?" She snapped off a salute so quickly, her hand was jarred from smacking against her head. "Sir, yes sir!"

"Now I will talk to Jella Korrigan and coordinate our movements with the other rebel. Kelly, Palmer, I want all intel on that site where Diego's body is being held, and all possible scenarios. The rest of you, prep your gear and armor. We're traveling light, but I'm pulling the gear limitation." John Doe ordered. His last words garnered more than a few smiles. All of the Spartans had brought along some extra gear with them when they had been sent here. Most of it however, had since been gathering dust in the safe houses, as to use them would be far too noticeable. The Spartan-IVs present were looking forward to it.

****APUFMKII****

The Castle Facility was normally one of the most heavily defended locations on Khar'Shan. Second only to Bythor Fortress in terms of soldiers defending it, automated defenses, and heavy vehicles stationed there. On any given day, any attempt to besiege the facility could be considered pointless at best, suicidal at worst. Yet today there was a fairly obvious gap in the facility's defenses. A place that any experienced and observant soldier would probably identify as the weak point.

But the sight just filled John Doe with suspicion.

"Sir?" John didn't need to turn his head to know it was Palmer approaching him, he could see her IFF on his radar. "What's going on, why aren't we moving?"

Handing her the binoculars, he pointed to the facility entrance they were looking at. Taking them, Palmer looked where her CO had point. The binoculars linking with her helmet to provided a clean image. "They're trying to bait us." John nodded, waving at her to get back.

Moving away from their vantage point, they rejoined the others waiting for them. "Sir, something wrong?"

"They wanted us to come here." John pulled up the map on his HUD, sharing it with the others. "They've purposely created a gap in their defenses."

"So, whats the plan then sir?"

"Attack them where the defenses appear strongest." On the map, points were highlighted.

"What!...why would we do anything so suicidal?" Palmer asked indignantly.

"Because they would never expect it...besides I nearly certain that

those 'weak points' are where are actually perfect kill zones they have set up." John answered confidently.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because its what I would do in their position." John replied. "They know that they have nothing that can match us. Nothing that can be our equals. This is their attempt to capture us."

"Going loud then, sir?" Demenux asked, warily eyeing Palmer, or more specifically, her hand cannon. "If we are, might as well let Palmer fire the first shot. If that doesn't bring everyone runningâ€|"

The Spartan CO shook his head. "No. We're going quiet on this one. For a moment at least. We take down as many as we can, as quietly as we can. Infiltrate as deep as we can, until it's no longer a viable tactic."

"What is defined as 'no longer viable'?"

"Should, both our presence be detected, and heavy enemy resistance is encountered."

"So basically if we get caught, and it's stupid to try and keep the fight hidden." Demenux summed up.

John nodded. "Once that occurs," They all knew that with a facility like this, going loud was inevitable, "use any and all means available to reach the current objective. Our first objective will be to find a data center, from there, track down our primary objective. And then we move to secure or destroy it, then exfiltrate."

"What if we come across any batarian HVIs?" Palmer asked. Eager to inflict some pain on somebody that actually mattered to their enemy.

"Targets of Opportunity. Engage should you encounter them, do not search for them. Your HUD will identify potential HVIs. DO NOT ENGAGE non-HVI Civilians."

"You're no fun." Palmer said theatrically, but with no real heat. Too much of a professional to really argue with her superior (at least when he was obviously right).

Less than a mile away, Wreav, Nyreen, and Kirrahe, and their squads, were preparing for the Spartans arrival. Checking weapons, issuing last minute orders, and double checking their plans.

"You think they'll take the bait?" Nyreen asked, referring to both the armor and the entry point.

"Hard to say...we know the humans can fight well because of their technological edge but they could have easily become so arrogant and dependent on superior firepower that they don't have decent tacticians and strategists anymore" captain Kirrahe openly theorized.

"It also depends on whether the enemy commander has a working brain." Wreav added. "These Spartans aren't just some random grunts."

"Wreav has a point...taking these super soldiers down won't be easy." Nyreen said uneasily.

"Superior weapons and abilities only count for so much...even the best soldiers have their limits" Kirrahe replied confidently.

"Sir we just received word that rebel forces have attacked the mayoral mansion in the nearest town" an STG agent reported to captain Kirrahe.

"I guess its started" Wreav said with anticipation in his voice.

Nyreen, Kirrahe, and Wreav had all expected the rebels to mount attacks near the Castle Facility before assaulting it. Both to confuse their enemy and divert hostile forces away from the Castle. Now they knew the Spartans had taken the bait.

Captain Kirrahe looked at his two comrades and said "by this time tomorrow any Spartan stupid enough to enter this facility will be dead or captured and we will all be promoted."

"The threat of one's annihilation, is a most excellent motivator."

-Unknown

Author's Note:

aDarkOne:

Yes we ended the chapter on a cliffhangerâ€|

BECAUSE WE ARE EVIL! :)

Actually we were originally planning to include the battle in this chapter. But then we realized that we couldn't do the battle for the Spartan's corpse justice without making this chapter ridiculously long.

So there will be a lot of Spartan action next chapter.

Follower38:

Yes, as my co-writer says, we end the chapter with a cliffhanger. And aside from wanting to use the author's trolling, we felt that if we tried to include the scene here, we would not be able to do it just. Also, I have posted a new archive regarding some backstory details as a new story. It is on my page for those of you who wish to read it. Combat and warfare will be appearing more so. And the next chapter, wellâ€|.let's just say the Batarian Hegemony is about to learn just why Spartans were called _Demons._

23. Shadow War: Escalation and Hubris

Alternate Past Uncertain Future Mk. II

Chapter 23

Shadow War: Escalation and Hubris

"Dead or Alive, no one gets left behind."

-Unknown

"We can't stop them!" A Hegemony Lieutenant shouted into his radio. "We need reinforcements! Th-gurk!" Blood gushed from his throat, cutting off his words and life as he futilely tried to stem the flow.

"They got the officer!" A soldier screamed, "We got to get out of here!" Before he could even turn, a boot slammed into his back and slammed him into the ground. Snapping his spine and crushing his organs as the Spartan jumped back using his thruster pack, drawing two M7s and cutting down the entire squad with 5mm rounds.

"If these guys are their elite forces, they really need to rethink what that word means." Palmer ground out as she eviscerated another hegemony soldier with her hand cannon before clicking empty. The cylinder tossed out the side, twelve shells ejecting and dropping to the floor before Palmer slammed in another load attached to a disintegrating ring. "Sir, how much longer are we going to be here?"

John paused to bring up his jackal shield, stopping the bullets from striking the delicate console before returning the favor with his Cerberus rifle. "Kalimaya, time?"

"Another ten seconds." Kalmiya, the first teacher of the Spartan-II after Mendez, answered. "Despite my intrusion and cyber warfare suites, these batarians are redundant. There's so much here that the sheer volume is actually slowing me down."

"Just what are we even waiting on?" Demeneux asked, his MA6A chattering as it spit out twice-over accelerated rounds. "I mean, she's an AI, it shouldn't take this long."

"I may not be as capable as my 'sister'," Even for a dumb AI, Kalmiya sounded peeved, "But I am working on copying, deleting, sabotaging, and tracing as many files as I can, all at the same time."

Entering the facility without anyone noticing had been easy enough. Even without an active camouflage module, their training was enough to get them deep inside, and kill as many guards as they could get away with.

It was only when they had to insert Kalmiya into the system, that someone had noticed their presence. By notice, a guard, on sheer chance, had walked right into a Spartan. Reporting the intrusion just as he was shot down. Of course, by then it did the Spartans no good. The enemy knew that the Spartans were inside, and were rapidly re-deploying their own forces in response. Of course, neither did it mean it did the defenders any good.

Nevertheless, the fact that they had faced so little opposition yet convinced John Doe that he had been right. The obvious weak-points in the Castle Facility's defenses had been nothing more than cleverly disguised traps. And by going through the apparent strong points

instead they had evaded the teeth of the defenses.

'Of course they were still strong enough to be dangerous' John thought as an armor piercing bullet smashed into his visor. His shields preventing any serious injury, but the kinetic force still knocking his head back a little. 'And they're learning.' Before this engagement, the Hegemony forces were barely capable of depleting their shields. Now they were using more exotic munitions, something John hadn't seen before. Whatever these new rounds were, they were doing a far better job of tackling their shields than before.

The last of the Hegemony forces slumped dead as Demenux bashed his body against the wall with his Jackal shield, crushing him.

"Looks like its clear sailing from here" Palmer said arrogantly. Then though as summoned by her words, a dozen fresh troops stormed into the room. Without pause, the fresh group immediately opening fire on the Spartans. Two of them charging Palmer with all the fearlessness of krogan gripped by bloodrage.

To the Spartan's shock, the pair actually managed to knock her back. Hitting her harder than anything other than a Hunter or Elite warrior had before. Doing their best to pin the woman beneath them. "Get the fuck off me!" Her hand cannon having skid away when she was tossed to the floor, she started punching the soldier, trying to knock them off.

Once, twice, three times she hit the head with all her might, and still the soldier did not budge, nor did it try to attack. Neither did its partner. Both intent and content on keeping their quarry pinned. "A little help here!"

In response, John Doe shot the one of the soldiers through the chest, shredding the armor. However, the soldier didn't react to being wounded, even more ominously, he didn't bleed either. Continuing to do his best to hold the Spartan woman still.

Forgoing his rifle, he grabbed the one he had shot by the back of his armor, tossing him into the others, who were firing at the other Spartans, knocking them down like pins.

Both her arms now free, Palmer grabbed the head of the one pinning her to the floor before twisting it hard. But instead of hearing tearing muscle and snapping bone, she heard the snapping of plastic and metal as the entire head came clean off. "They're drones!" She realized, before hearing a slight whine emanating from the body.

In truth the Spartan had brought this on herself. Since her arrival on Khar'Shan, she had been excessively violent against her targets. Brutalizing them to the point where it was almost an act of cruelty. She had not curbed her behavior in the slightest on this mission. As a result, among the Hegemony forces at least, Palmer had become infamous, her now signature Scout-type MJOLNIR Gen-II armor making her a priority target for all Hegemony forces.

As soon as they had been discovered, the new batarian sized mechs had engaged and spread throughout the facility. All of them searching for the intruders, and already calculating how best to deal with an threat. Even a Spartan like Palmer.

Palmer felt herself being pulled away just as the robotic soldier detonated. Turning what would have been an explosion at point blank range into something merely disorienting as she and her rescuer was knocked off their feet by the blast.

Their helmets blared, reporting shattered shields and structural damage in their armor. "How did you know?" she asked John Doe as he helped her to her feet.

"I didn't."

Palmer was gobsmacked, not sure how to respond. Not that she had time to as another squad rounded the corner and charged forward.

The Spartan-IVs realized the easy part was definitely over. They were now in what might be the fight of their lives. As the one of the most well defended fortresses in the Batarian Hegemony to devote its full resources to crushing them.

Kalmiya's voice filled their helmets over the cacophony of fire. "I've got their database and the location of our Spartan. I'm placing a waypoint on your HUDs." As she said, the waypoints appeared pointing to a location deeper into the facility. "You better work fast though, I'm getting reports of heavy reinforcements approaching the facility."

****APUFMKII****

Far from the battle raging inside the mountain, Datak Korra watched from safety. Seeing the carnage unfold from the cameras scattered throughout the facility. "Hmm...juggernauts, devastators, analysts, strategists and infiltrators, it seems I was wrong about these Spartans." Datak leaned forward, seeing again a Spartan emerge from the shadows as though it were part of it. "They are not simple super soldiers, they are the ultimate soldiers. This, changes thingsâ€|"

As though it knew he were watching, one of the larger Spartans made a cutting motion across his neck. Not a moment later, the feeds were replaced with static. "Yes, this changes things immenselyâ€|" When it came to super soldiers, everyone had their own opinions, but more often than not, every design exemplified a certain skill. Whether that be infiltration or frontline combat, an unparalleled strategist or combat engineer. Even the special forces were designed as such. Biotics, biology, technology, etc...Evidently these Spartans were designed and trained to excel in virtually every facet of modern combat, or least that's what Datak assumed.

"Well, the program will certainly have its work cut out for them." He mused, thinking of those in charge of the Hegemony Super Soldier program, codenamed: Golgatha. His fingers danced as he tried to bring back the video feeds from the Castle, but try as he might, the static never left.

Despite not being able to see or even hear just what was happening, Korra felt what the outcome would be. He was not young by his race's standards, having gained a wealth of knowledge and experience from both his time on the battlefield and in the political arena. In both cases, he had usually emerged triumphant.

And all that experience had proved that he should trust his own instincts. Datak's intuition had saved him from misfortune numerous times. Abstaining or distancing himself from what seemed like a great opportunity, only to be proved right when it began to fall apart. Of course he had used this to great effect as well, but that was a story for another time.

And what his gut was telling him now, was that everyone inside that facility was now as good as dead. Along with everything inside it. Of course, this would mean that he would be the one informing the Citadel Council about this failure, since the others would most likely be dead. Still, he could manipulate this, to an extent. Drawing up his files, he began pulling every video he had on the Spartans. Whether it be in action, or after-action analysis, compiling it together with a number of files written up already in regards to those events.

He hesitated though, seeing a certain set of files. These were his own personal copies of the Spartan's autopsy report and the armor analysis. Right now, the Hegemony was the only one to have this prize: a detailed, if limited, analysis of a Spartan. If he kept it to himself, it would give him a powerful bargaining power during any future meetings with the Council, or any race other than the humans for that matter. But if he somehow were to die—

Korra grudgingly and reluctantly sent those files to the Council as well. While he would continue to seek advantage for the Hegemony and himself, the high admiral knew that he needed the Council Races. Without their support the Batarian Hegemony stood no chance against the military juggernaut the UNSC represented. Unfortunately, the Asari Republics, Krogan Empire, Salarian Union, and Turian Hierarchy all feared humanity (with good reason) and disliked the Hegemony, so Korra needed to do all he could to cast the Hegemony as useful and the humans as vulnerable in the eyes of the Council Races.

'What we need to do is make this about human aggression, instead of whether or not people like the Hegemony.' Datak thought as an idea began to take form in his mind.

"Contact the Department of Information Control, tell them I need them to start making an...export." Korra ordered as he also sent all the Spartan files to the institution responsible for censorship and propaganda in the Hegemony.

As a loyal servant of the Hegemony, sharing classified information with the public went against the grain. But if the Citadel Council tried to bury the human connection to and Spartan involvement in the rebellion, leaving the Hegemony to wither on the vine with only minimal support. He would ensure that all their plans for secrecy came to naught. And reveal just what humanity was trying to do in Council space to the entire galaxy.

If the Hegemony were to fall to these humans, that Datak Korra would ensure that it wouldn't be going down alone.

****APUFMKII****

Spartans were used to fighting living troops. Soldiers who experienced fear, who needed to breath, and who would have difficulty standing utterly still. Unfortunately for, none of these qualities

applied to the batarian sized mechs (all dressed as regular Hegemony soldiers) that were assaulting them in ever increasing numbers as they ventured deeper and deeper into the Castle Facility.

Unlike their living counterparts, the machines were unrelenting aggressive. Some marching forward, heedless of the danger. Others unrelenting firing upon their quarry. And some simply charging head on, trying to rush the Spartans.

Having seen what these machines could do, the Spartans took no chances, blowing off heads to shut down them before they could even get close, or blowing off limbs when that didn't work. Yet for everything they did, the Hegemony proved they were learning.

Demeneux was the first to fall to the damned machines. Literally. A pair of them falling onto him, from where they had been waiting near the ceiling, and grabbing onto the Spartan around the neck and torso. Detonating just as he tried to engage his Armor Lock. But it was almost futile, the armor ability had not been able to fully engage. The force of the explosion shattering his visor and sending shrapnel into his eyes. The rest of his armor fared just better, blackened and slightly warped by the explosion.

Were it not for that split-second decision, there was little doubt there would have been much of Spartan left at all.

However, the blinded Demeneux was still a pitiful sight. Reflexively trying to use his ruined eyes as he rapidly turned his head back and forth. Becoming more and more panicked as he realized just how injured he truly was.

"Someone grab Demeneux and pull him back!" John ordered, taking his attention from the battle for a split second. A split-second was all three mechs needed, leaping off from behind other mechs, pushing off from the ceiling and tackling the Spartan Captain Commander to the ground. A faint whine could be heard coming from all three drones as they primed their charges.

But he was not known as the commander of the entire Spartan corps without reason. John ditched his rifle, letting it fall from his fingers before they rolled up into a fist. A plasma dagger snapped into existence from his knuckle-plate, a gift from the Arbiter himself. Skewering one of the drones and lifting into the air, even as he forced himself back onto his feet, the other two drones still clinging, still charging.

He punched the air, with the drone still skewered, throwing the drone off the dagger and away from him.

His other hand forming a fist and a second plasma dagger snapping into existence as well. Severing the arm of a drone at the shoulder before he grabbed its neck and crushed it into dust. Tossing it aside and then seizing the third and final drone, he ripped off its head and threw it at the other mechs in a single move.

The exploding drone caused the other military mechs to detonate too. The resulting massive explosion all but wrecking the hallway they were in. Knocking the Spartans back onto their asses as the explosive shockwave slammed into them. One of them, a Spartan-IV by the named

of O'Neill, crashed headfirst into a wall, a sickening crack could have been heard, if not for the blast.

"Sound off, assist the wounded!" John moved to O'Neill, bringing up his biosigns on his HUD. The young Spartan was still alive, but nearly unconscious. According to the suit, O'Neill had suffered considerable head trauma, possibly had a concussion and spinal fractures. It couldn't tell him if it was severe or not, but John wasn't going to take any chances.

"How's Demeneaux?"

"I'm fine sir." the Spartan said with apparent calmness.

In truth Demeneaux was far from fine. But once the initial shock had worn off his own martial pride and rigorous training he had undergone to become a Spartan kicked in. Demeneaux might have been blinded, he might be weakened, but he could still fight. Any emotional breakdowns could wait till later.

"Just hand me my gun and tell me where they are." All Spartans had gone under sensory deprivation training, though no one had ever expected to need to use it. His fingers fumbling around until Palmer shoved his rifle into his hands.

"Just keep close to me." She said to him, with an unusual softness to her voice. She lifted the blinded Spartan to his feet. "What about O'Neill?"

"Moderate head trauma, possible concussion and spinal fractures." Kalimaya told her. "He can move, but he's not going to be fighting anymore unless he has to."

Palmer focused on her CO. "Sir, is it wise to keep moving in? If we keep advancing, it's sure that we'll be facing more of these guys." Referring to the mechs that had almost just killed two of their number.

"I'm sure of that as well." John agreed, pausing to strip a block of ammo from a Hegemony weapon. The bottom of the weapon clicked open, releasing a strip of metal, grated so much it was thin as paper, the air warping from the heat coming from it, before being slammed shut as John slotted the stolen ammo block. "But we still have a mission to complete."

"Guess we can't leave that kind of tech around for the four-eyes to copy." Palmer admitted. To her surprise, the Spartan-II shook his head.

"That's not the reason, Spartan Palmer."

"Then what then?"

"No one gets left behind, dead or alive. I thought that you, of all people Palmer, would understand that."

Palmer simply nodded in understanding. Feeling a weight in her chest as she remembered times when her fellow ODSTs had refused to leave her behind. But the touching moment was ruined as a door exploded inward, and living troops rushed into the room.

"Turian Blackwatch and Cabal. Special Forces." John Doe answered as the turian special forces and the Spartans prepared to open fire at each other.

"Just regular turians...ha, we can take them easily." the blind man replied with false bravado.

At which point the turian soldiers began to glow blue as they biotically grabbed nearby explosives and other weapons. Hurling them at the Spartans with lethal force.

"You just had to say it." Palmer muttered sarcastically as she rolled her eyes, bringing her hand-cannon to bear.

****APUFMKII****

Despite being center of galactic commerce, politics, and diplomacy for many people throughout the galaxy, the Citadel was in many ways a world unto itself. This was sometimes even true for the Councilors, who had their own private dining room in the Citadel Tower. The dining room was large, well furnished, soundproofed, and about as well protected against electronic surveillance as they could make any location.

Theoretically the Councilors could stay in the dining room as long as they wanted. Untroubled by the outside world. In practice however, the Councilors always brought their problems with them into the dining room. Moreover, ever since First Contact with humanity, the things that demanded their attention seemed to increase.

So as usual, this would be a working lunch.

"So how is your brother doing on Khar'Shan?" Cicero asked just before he put a spoonful of his favorite dessert into his mouth.

In other circumstances it would have been a casual question. But since Wreav was leading the krogan special forces assisting the Hegemony to root out the Rebellion, the question was actually quite pertinent. Especially given what had happened recently to the asari commandos sent there.

"He's keeping a cool head for now." Wrex replied, cutting into his Varren steak with a precision one would expect from someone of his size. "Though, I worry about him. We've just managed to connect since our brooding days."

"That's the problem with living so long...eventually you outlive most of your friends and family." Tevos said softly, a distant look in her eyes.

Annoyed by the commentary, because as hardened as he was, Wrex still didn't like being reminded that most of his friends and family were dead, the krogan Councilor asked, "And how are the commandos you sent to the Hegemony?"

"They...haven't reported in for some time now." Tevos was eating, even by her standards, an unusually light meal. "I have started growing concernedâ€|"

"When soldiers go missing in action in hostile territory, it is logical to assume that they have been killed or captured." Vald'n pointed out.

"But we sent over twenty of our best." Tevos tried to explain. "Some of our best, all of them with centuries of experience and combat." She didn't sound confident when she asked, "Has any of your forces reported anything?"

"No, not yet." Wrex answered with a shrug.

"High Admiral Korra might be restricting their communications." Cicero said suspiciously. The turian might be the biggest supporter of the Hegemony on the Council, but that didn't mean that Cicero liked or trusted the batarians.

"Perhaps." Vald'n admitted. "If he is, we'll need to discuss with him how...disadvantageous, his usual practices will be for us. Until then however, I think we should focus on matters closer to home."

"The New Covenant is taking a harder stance in their negotiations...its as though they don't want an embassy or freer trade with us anymore." Tevos explained. Switching to what she considered the more important topic.

"That's going to be a problem for us." Wrex interjected. "We were banking on trading with them to get our hands on their slipspace technologies. Or least their theories. Would have made our work a lot easier." Finishing off the last of his stake, he thought to himself, 'We're missing something here, and whatever it is, it's going to hit us like Kalros charging a Tomkah."

"Perhaps the humans are somehow keeping the Covenant Races from reaching out to us...it would certainly be in their interest to do so." Vald'n suggested.

"I doubt it." Cicero objected. "They were never truly interested in establishing trade or formal diplomatic relations with us, yes. But they at least made a half-hearted attempt to establish an embassy and trade by private citizens was considerable, if not substantial."

"Your point?" Vald'n questioned.

"If you would let me finish, I could tell you." Cicero pointed out. "I've never believed the idea that the Covenant were the glorified varren, leashed by the humans. They are far too powerful to be anything other than equals, or even their technological superiors." He shot a glare at his salarian counterpart to prevent him from interrupting. "My point is, something has happened within the New Covenant. Something that made them give up entirely on diplomatic ties to the point they outright reject them. Trade by private citizens from the New Covenant has also dropped, but not disappeared. So its likely that any sort of trade or commerce with us has been discouraged, but not outright banned."

"The humans certainly don't see them as their equals. Whenever I talk to them about the Covenant Races, I am struck by the raw hatred the humans feel towards their former enemies. Especially among the

generation who fought the Covenant." Tevos explained.

"Well, its no reason to not keep trying, after all-" Valdn paused as they heard the door chime. "-we ordered no interruptions" the salarian continued irritably as Saren Arterius entered the room.

"I know...my apologies Councilor but this is urgent." Saren announced. The four Councilors shared looks before motioning to the ex-Spectre to continue. Saren explained as he keyed his omnitool, "Again, I apologize, but we've received a data packet sent from within the Batarian Hegemony."

"By our forces?"

The turian advisor shook his head. "No. From Datak Korra himself."

Valdn looked at his barely touched meal in annoyance and said. "We should probably watch it in the War Room then."

All the other Councilors made sounds of displeasure, but nobody disagreed with Valdn. The computer systems in the War Room were probably the most sophisticated and secure in the Citadel. Unlike the relatively basic gear in their private dining room.

As they followed the turian, Tevos asked, "Just what is the nature of this package? Even if it is that important, I can sense that something about it is cause distress for you." The others picked up on the observation, now that Tevos had mentioned it. Saren was showing signs of stress; his nervous tick of touching his prosthetic arm, a slightly hurried walk, and the other signs.

"You're correct, Councilor...However I think I should let you see the video first before you hear my impressions." Saren said professionally.

Once they entered the War Room, Saren immediately brought up the data files on the holographic projector that was in the center of the room. Showing his superiors the videos that Korra had sent them. Images of Spartans fighting and killing Hegemony troops, scenes of the human super soldiers slaughtering (the word 'battle' didn't apply to such one-sided fights) batarian soldiers, and finally the image of a Hegemony gunship taking out a Spartan in a suicide attack.

Wrex managed to summarize what everyone in the room was feeling with just two words: "Wellâ€¦.shitâ€¦." No one felt the need to try to argue the point. "I assume you've already confirmed the authenticity of this data packet?" He asked, receiving confirmation in return.

Cicero impassively stared at the final image of the gunship smashing into the Spartan. His eyes focused on the impact point. "So...that's what it takes to kill one of these spirits-forsaken abominationsâ€¦"

"Yes, apparently our regular troops CAN take out Spartans. But only with superior firepower and overwhelming numbers on our sides...much like fighting their naval forces." Saren explained.

"But not without significant casualties, evidently." Cicero

countered, referring to the trail of dead left in the Spartan's wake.

"I do however, have some relatively good news on that front." Saren added as he brought up the last video file on the holoprojector.

Showing a scene of asari commandos fighting a lone Spartan warrior. Taking heavy casualties until they used their biotics to get the upper hand. Apparently in the process of killing the Spartan until rebel reinforcements arrived and wiped out the severely distracted and wounded commandos.

"You call that good news! all the commandos died and the human got away!" Tevos exclaimed in rare show of anger.

"You are right Councilor, BUT may I call your attention to the fact that a group of Council soldiers without heavy weapons or vehicles was able to take down a human super soldier. It was only due to bad luck on their part that the Spartan managed to get away." Saren calmly explained. "They used their biotics to effectively immobilize it."

"You mean nearly." Wrex shot back. "In my book, it doesn't count until it's actually dead."

"The Spartan may very well HAVE died. All we know is that rebels killed the remaining commandos, and dragged the Spartan away." Saren argued.

"If asari biotics are effective against Spartansâ€|" Vald'n said in musing tones. "Althoughâ€|" He trailed off, lost in thought.

"Then we need more trained asari soldiers...significantly more considering the fact that they still need superior numbers to take down Spartans and for all we know there are THOUSANDS of the damn things" Cicero confidently stated.

"That is not going to be possible, or at the very least extremely difficult." Tevos tried to argue. "The kind of power we all just saw it, it can not just be trained. It must be grown. Asari biotics grow in power as we age, any experience we obtain just adds to it. The kind of power they used takes decades, if not centuries to obtain."

"Then do it artificially." Cicero countered, not in the mood for an excuses. "Amplifiers, augmentations, gene-splicing. Use Red Sand if you have to!"

"We may not actually have to do soâ€|" Tevos began with a note of desperation in her voice. Amazed at what circumstances were forcing her to do.

"There is an ancient sect of warriors among my people. Those are perhaps the peak of Asari skill and power. The Order of the Justicars."

"Justicars are tough no question. Hell the toughest female I ever met was one, but they only follow their Code. They won't fight the humans just because we tell them to." Wrex said skeptically.

"The Justicars fought against the Rachni. Once they realize that humanity is a threat to all the asari and their allies, I am sure they will see reason." Tevos replied with a smile.

But in truth the Councilor was filled with doubt. The Justicars were all fanatically devoted to their Code, and slavery was against that Code. Regardless of the larger social-political concerns, convincing the Justicars to overlook that fact would not be easy. She didn't want to consider how the public would react if the Justicars ever publicly stated they would not fight the humans in the Hegemony.

However, Tevos had to. Because without the Justicars support, the Asari Republics would have no choice but to ask their own people to fight. And Tevos doubted that the Republics or their people had the strength to do that.

****APUFMKII****

"We're here!" Palmer told the others, slamming her hand against it. "I don't think a regular breaching charge is going to work."

"Place a demolition charge! Shaped Charge setting, maximum yield." Palmer nodded and pulled a small box attached to her lower back. Which unfolded before being magnetically attaching to the door. It was a little trick they had learned from Covenant technologies. Being able to create a single explosives pack that could be programmed from a number of detonations and explosive power.

Inside the lab containing Diego's corpse and equipment, the scientists who had been fortunate enough to have been here when the attack began, were hiding in various parts of the lab. Clutching tools turned into makeshift weapons.

They had heard fierce fight coming from outside the door, but none of them had been brave enough to approach it. Knowing that only three sets of blast doors separated them from the deadly Spartans. The distant sound of an explosion signaling that one of the doors had been breached.

But after a moment, one of the scientists said "this is stupid...were not soldiers" as he dropped the tool that he had been about to use as a makeshift club. Turning to a control panel as he activated something.

"What are you doing Gothel?" one of his colleagues asked as the scientist began the process of awakening one of their other projects in a nearby room.

"You KNOW what I'm doing" Gothel replied grimly.

"BUT HE'S NOT READY FOR COMBAT YET!" his comrade shouted.

"He's ready enough. We'll never finish working on him if we're dead." Gothel said as the 'male' in question entered the room.

"Xero Heavy Assault Mech online." It was a massive quadruped mech, taller than even a krogan, and several times as heavy.

But what made the Xero Heavy Assault Mech truly special was its software. Although it would be considered among the dimmest of Dumb AIs by the UNSC, it was nevertheless still an artificial intelligence (and therefore very illegal in Citadel space). Programmed to analyze its targets and destroy them in the most efficient manner possible.

"Awaiting commandsâ€¦" It droned, just as another, louder boom thudded from the entryway, signifying another door had been breached. "Threat detected. Weapons systems coming online." From its back, a heavy chaingun unfolded, flanked by two smaller machine guns. From its shoulders, thin blades unfolded from inside, its lethal claws already unfolded.

It also had numerous internal weapons systems that could spring out at a moment's notice, such as a sonic cannon, flamethrower, and poison gas emitters. But its most devastating weapon was its reaction time. Because although its 'thoughts' were relatively simple, it could still come to decisions and react faster than virtually any organic.

A loud clank resounded through the room from the door, prompting the scientists to cower behind the Xero-mech. The AI quickly focusing on the door, just in time for them to blow open, ripping outwards from the blast. Infrared sighting cutting through the smoke, outlining the hostiles behind. One of them even starting to charge forward.

"Targets identified. Human: Spartans. Calculating stratagem."

The Xero had files on many potential enemies, including Spartans, and it had come to the conclusion that it might not be able to kill the Spartan in one strike. Therefore the machine had decided that its best option was to severely decrease the human super soldier's speed and maneuverability. By literally breaking their knees.

"Firing." The heavy cannon on its back roared, as it fired a round at the ground right before Palmer's feet. The Spartan-IV just grinned as she activated her thrusters, propelling herself sideways and away from the blast, only to fly straight into another cannon shell at her feet. The blast sent her tumbling, almost flying through the air, her hand cannon clattering across the room for the second time that day.

when she came to halt and looked up, she found herself staring straight into the polarized faceplate of the mech. "Target Identified: Spartan, Banshee. Neutralizing." It raised one of the giant paws and brought it crashing down on one of Palmer's legs, even as she tried to roll away, her shields doing nothing to stop it.

Palmer screamed as over a ton of metal came crashing down on her right knee. Crushing both flesh and metal in the process, destroying her joint, and leaving her in agony. Palmer had never experienced such pain before. In moments her aura of invincibility had been shattered, as an alien machine (created by a species she thought of as primitive and inferior) crippled her. It raised the leg again, preparing to exterminate the traumatized and humbled Spartan with its next blow.

Only to be knocked back as rounds hammered the faceplate, John shouting into the coms, "Spartans, move in and neutralize target!" The Spartan in question was leading the charge.

The mech briefly looked at the approaching threat, rounds pinging off its armor, before looking back at the crippled Spartan beneath it. "Target threat: Minor. Prioritizing; new targets acquired." It kicked Palmer away from it, slamming into a wall.

The mounted guns cut loose, the chaingun roaring again as it fired shell after shell at the lead Spartan, its machine gun focusing on the other Spartans. But the leader managed to dodge all its shots, and the ordinary bullets did nothing to the other Spartans armor, the shields stopping them cold. So the Xero decided to change tactics.

A faint hum could be heard, even over the pinging of bullets, as it charged up its speakers. Indifferent to the fact that its relatively fragile creators were in the room with it. Its unfinished programming not covering what to do in situations with nearby friendlies. A sonic blast SHATTERED all the glass in the room, deafening to scientists, those closest bleeding from their eyes and ears. The Spartans forced to their knees as the sonic blast pierced even their helmets, some reflexively grabbing their helmet where their ears would be.

"Noooo...you stupid machine you supposed to PROTECT us!" Gothel whimpered as he clutched his bleeding ears. One of the scientists, either in fear or stupidity actually charged at the mech, a plasma torch clutched in their hand. Stabbing the cutting tool straight into one of the rear leg servos.

"New targets acquired. Threat analysis: Significant. Intimate knowledge of this platform. Exterminating."

Another whining charge could be heard as it brought up and charged up its railgun. But it didn't fire the weapon at the batarian male. The angle made such a move impractical, moreover against such a threat the firepower was unnecessary. The mech simply smashed its gun into his head with enough force to crush his skull. Literally destroying the brains that had helped design it.

Mere seconds later it fired the railgun at Palmer. Attempting to finish the crippled Spartan off. Only to have something get in the way. Spartan-IV Thomas Lasky, diving right between Palmer and the Xero-mech. His Jackal Arm-Shield snapping into existence as he dove. In the span of a second, the hyper-accelerated round slammed into the shield, trying to burrow its way straight through the hardened plasma, Lasky forcing back the round with his arm, just as he was about to give way, the round ricocheting off.

Just as the railgun charged up again, Lasky raised Palmer's hand-cannon and fired, the twin rounds slamming into the gun, knocking the gun away from and severing exposed cables. But not before it fired again, a hapless scientist exploding and painting the room and his colleagues in gore.

The Xero responded to Lasky's aggression by simply ramming into him. Knocking the shield aside as it prepared to launch its remaining arsenal at him. Tilting to the left as its bad leg, damaged by its creator, strained under the Xero's massive weight.

Both Spartans were thrown again, the shield holding, but doing nothing to stop the Xero's charge. Lasky landing on top of Palmer, who was starting to fade from the blood loss. Lasky barely managed to roll off his fellow Spartan before he heard the Xero-mech. "Threat status elevated: Highly lethal." Small nozzles popped out from beneath the faceplate, small flames at their tips. "Exterminating with extreme prejudice."

Just as it was about to incinerate the two Spartans, John leapt onto it, kicking the mounted guns and shearing them off at the same time before grabbing the Xero by the faceplate. It tried to buck off the massive Spartan, but to no avail. Even as it tried to throw him off, John drew his own hand-cannon, blasting at the mech's back until it clicked empty. "Hostile found! Reassessing threat level!" John slotted the hand-cannon against his hip and made a fist, a plasma dagger springing to life before he buried it in its back, the smell of ozone and melting plastic permeating the air, the xero screaming even as he punched it again, burying his fist inside. The mech still trying to buck off it's rider. "Warning, warning! Energy-core damaged. Energy core exposed."

Then John Doe pulled its heart sized power cell out. The thing emitting intense enough heat that the Spartan could feel it even though his armor (knowing that without that protection, the heat would be enough to burn his hand away). Tossing the power cell away before it could eat through his fingers.

The Xero-Mech managing a few last words. "Threat Status Elevated: Hyper-Lethal Vector. Recommendation: Total retreat..."

John focused back on his Spartans, the others who had been by the door since it began were fine, or at least had not earned any new injuries. "Lasky, what's your status? And Palmers?"

"I'm fine, Sir." Lasky pulled a small pack from the back of his armor. "Palmer isn't though. Her left leg is just meat now, not much left except above the knee. Biofoam's working its magic, and I've given her some nanites to help with the blood loss, but we need to get her out of here."

"Can she move?"

Lasky shook his head. "Not without help. I'll hand her off to O'Neill for now. But we need to report all this back to command." He didn't need to add that they also needed replacements for the wounded Spartans.

"Understood. Move the rest of the exfiltration point and back to base. I'll make my back alone."

"Understood sir." Lasky gave a salute before addressing the others. "Spartans, we are leaving! O'Neill, you've got Palmer. Demeneaux, just follow our voices, keep a hand on Palmer if you have to. I'll take point."

John watched as they left, eyeing the batarian corpses as they walked over them. "Kalimya, the scientists, were there any-"

"Survivors? Unfortunately yes. We gunned down most of them as they

tried to flee but two of them managed to escape through an exit we didn't notice until then." the AI explained. "All of them targets of opportunity as well."

John frowned beneath his helmet. While the survivors would build the reputation of the Spartans, which was already considerable, the fact that any managed to escape irked him. It was almost an insult to the Spartans, that people could actually escape him.

"Diego's body is right through there, by the way." Kalimya's voice returning him back to reality as a waypoint appeared on his HUD. Following it, he found the room holding the fallen Spartan. Parts scattered across the room, under a variety of instruments. Their comrade reduced to little more than hunks of meat, metal, and plastic. A dead thing to be studied by hostile alien eyes.

A state of affairs John Doe considered intolerable. Diego may have been a fool and an arrogant thug but he had still been one of their own. Besides, too many humans had suffered and died to create the Spartans for John to allow immoral alien monsters such as the Hegemony to benefit from their techniques or technology. He grabbed Diego's helmet from one of the stands, yanking out the helmet-cam footage and dropping the helmet. Maybe this would provide insight as to how this mess even happened.

John approached the body directly, eyeing the dead Spartan. Diego's eyes still open, terror etched upon his face in his final moments, his head was the only part of his entire body to come out relatively unscathed. Despite everything, and however he personally may have felt, the man still a Spartan, and thus deserved some respect. He closed his eyes and made it so that Diego might have appeared asleep, before tearing the dog-tags off him.

Securing the dog-tags, John removed a Covenant-detpack from a pouch. Tapping a few buttons to arm it. When it detonated, the plasma would incinerate everything in a twenty meter radius, turning it to less than ash. Under other circumstances, he might not have even needed the detpack. Instead setting the armor's microfusion reactor to overload for the same effect. As it was, that was impossible since the armor had been more or less crushed.

Then John Doe prepared to leave. Knowing that the mission had been (or at least was about to be accomplished). More than ready to leave this wretched place.

But then his sensors picked up the sound of more incoming enemy reinforcements. Telling him that the fight was not over. And even though the Hegemony may have lost this battle, there was still the war to win.

****APUFMKII****

When Velo 'Mdama first became the New Covenant ambassador to the UEG, he had been a young and optimistic sangheili. He was chosen for his curiosity, wit, and (not least) because unlike many of his older peers, he had never hurt any human civilians or soldiers.

That, and he was the few remaining scions in his Keep, or clan, that were in any sort of position to redeem their the Keep after the actions of their previous Kaidon or Clan Head, Jul 'Mdama.

But after being stationed on Earth for three decades, his optimism was long gone and his youth was rapidly fading away. Thanks to all the ways that the UNSC in general and ONI in particular had taken advantage of, manipulated, and hurt his people since the end of the Great War, Velo tended to view anything they said skeptically at this point. Thus he was not a receptive audience when listening to ambassador Denton (who wanted to discuss setting up a meeting between the Arbiter and Lord Hood).

"Look, I'm trying to tell you that's WHY Hood wants to meet with Thel; to try and apologize for everything ONI's done."

"And why, after all this time, would he do that?" Velo questioned. "You humans seemed content with trying to, to use one of your sayings, send my people back to the Stone Age."

"That was Section III of the Office of Naval Intelligence. Hood may be the de-facto head of everything, but ONI never played by the book. It's only recently so much of this has even been hinted at, let alone come to light as it has now." Denton tried to explain. Though, he had to admit, even though it was the truth, it sounded incredibly flimsy to him. "Will you at least forward the message to the Arbiter?"

Velo nodded. "That at the very least, I will." Despite his own personal feelings, Velo wasn't about to utterly alienate the humans, considering how Denton and Hood had actually taken steps to be, if not friendly, were amicable to the New Covenant.

"I have to admit those fighters you used against ONI were very impressive." Denton said as he fished for information about the New Covenant's acquisition of Mass Effect technology.

"Another of your baseless accusations?" Velo prodded, not surprised at how Denton openly challenged him.

"More like process of elimination." Alan countered. "It's not as though the Citadel Council have managed to understand Slipspace at all."

Velo actually laughed at that. Saying after he got ahold of himself, "You sound as dismissive as our leaders once did about humanity. The old Covenant might be gone but your kind have been quick to embrace their brutal arrogance."

Denton nodded. "Perhaps, I think both our nations have learned much from the other, some could be done without."

Velo narrowed his eyes as he studied Denton. While his experiences kept him from trusting the human completely, Denton did seem somewhat sincere. Prompting him to say "let's assume for the moment that you and your superiors are sincere...what do the leaders of the UNSC really want now ambassador?"

Denton sighed as he was pinching his eyes. "I'm not going to beat around the bush too much but let me say this: if it were up to me, I'd ask you about this off the record, or however you wanted it. That being said: how in the Forerunners did your nation manage to adapt Mass Effect drives to your ships? You specialize more in dogma, not innovation, no offense."

"I've noticed that humans tend to say that immediately AFTER saying something truly offensive... Still you have a point, but why should I tell an ONI agent such sensitive information? Wouldn't helping someone such as you be a betrayal of my people?" Velo asked, genuinely curious as to what Denton would say.

"It would, if you were to give me the actual blueprints or any related data." Denton admitted. "But that's not what I'm asking for. What I am asking for, is how did your people manage to integrate this technology to your own so quickly? It is, after all, spitting in what we've known regarding physics for centuries, or millennia in your case. And that is not including what we are still learning about Slipspace."

Velo 'Mdama paused in thought. He was supposed to formally announce it soon anyway. If only to prevent any future diplomatic incidents. Perhaps he could garner some goodwill by telling ambassador Denton now.

"My new assistant would actually be the one you should talk to about that" Velo said, then he hit his intercom and stated "Corr'Voreem could you please join me in the office please."

Less than a minute later, a slender figure in an environmental suit entered the sangheili ambassador's office. His appearance making Alan Denton gasp aloud. As the blunt genius rapidly realized the implications of what he was seeing. His mind was racing, a million thoughts going through his head. And just one rose above the rest, 'Oh this is not good, not good at all.'

"An educated man like you no doubt recognizes a Quarian when he sees one...the newest members of our Covenant" Velo says with a cold smile as he observes Denton's reaction. Proud of the fact that he had finally been able to get the better of an ONI official.

****APUFMKII****

Spartans never die.

The phrase had emerged during the Great War as a defiant cry in the face of the seemingly overwhelming Covenant onslaught. It represented human strength and resolve, and was an open challenge to their enemy's might. A boast and claim to raise morale and create legendary figures for the people to believe in.

It was also strictly speaking a lie.

Something John Doe was all too aware of as he approached the last enemy strongpoint blocking his way to freedom. Tired and alone, while facing apparently overwhelming odds. Yet in an odd sort of way, the situation was pleasantly familiar to the jaded old warrior.

Days of never ending combat, being shuttled from one firefight to the next planet under siege. He cracked a smile to himself, whatever strain he felt upon his body, was nothing compared to what he been through during the Battles of Reach and Earth.

Still, He and his brothers and sisters had earned that reputation

of being impossible to kill. Each of them had, at minimum, six-figure kill count, pushing seven. While he was push eight figures. If it were up to him, and had the ammunition, he'd take the time to sweep this installation from top to bottom and clear it out completely.

As it was, he didn't have that luxury. Kalimya had kept feeding him, and presumably the others, about what was happening outside. Apparently, at least two divisions of ground forces were moving towards the installation. Along with a small force of frigates from high-orbit. Even for a Spartan, those numbers were suicide. The ground forces they could have handled, but the frigates, they had no chance.

"Lasky, what's your position?" He sprinted down the halls, seeing passageways littered with bodies or caved in by explosives. "Have you made it out of the installation yet?"

Gunfire could heard over the radio. "No sir, we had to detour to the original infiltration point, we-Damn! Someone take down the Shellhead!" Another double-crack from a KG .50x.50 was heard. "Sorry sir, but all the other exit points were locked down, and this was the closest one otherwise. We've made contact with hostile forces, but these aren't Hegemony! I-Shit!"

"Calm down Major." John chided. "Are they Citadel Forces? What strength?"

"It looks like Citadel Elites, sir. They've the training and the hardware to match. Palmer is fighting back, but from a fixed position. O'Neill is recovering, but he's nearly 100%. Demeneux is just keeping their heads down."

John kept sprinting, his HUD telling him he was only a hundred meters away, nothing for a Spartan. "Does O'Neill still have his active camouflage module? And his C-12 explosive?"

A rough, French-accented voice filled the comms. "Oui, captain! Still a little dizzy, but all good. What's the plan, sir?"

John filled in everyone on his plan, getting a few shocked gasps and silent treatments before they all confirmed their acceptance.

A short distance away, on the opposite side of the entrance in question, Nyreen, Kirrahe, and Wreav were preparing for the Spartan assault. Dozens of bipedal mechs in dressed as regular soldiers were positioned to face the Spartans first. Over twenty turian biotics were stationed to concentrate on the human soldiers as they entered the room, and thirty-five STG snipers were positioned throughout the area so that they could target hostiles wherever they might come in. With ten heavily armored (two ton) mechs held in reserve to be positioned however Kirrahe saw fit.

Kirrahe had even seen fit to equip his forces with anti-vehicle weapons. Knowing just how tough Spartans were. With the forces at their command, Kirrahe was convinced that he could destroy an army of regular troops ten times his forces size. But he was still going to play it smart, and let the humans come to him.

"Keep them pinned!" Wreav shouted, blasting away with his Graal Spike Thrower, a weapon usually reserved for killing Thresher Maws. "Don't

let them take a shot!" As if to prove his point, another thunderclap cracked the air and a krogan beside him dropped dead, missing half his hump. "Someone tell me, just why we're not shelling them?!"

"Because we want a body, not bloody pieces of meat!" Nyreen shouted, firing her sniper rifle, only to curse as her target dodged the shot, again. "Kirrahe, you got anything?"

"I'm picking up an encrypted transmission fortunately its one of the codes we decrypted...apparently most of the Spartans are wounded and calling for reinforcements." Kirrahe calmly announced.

"They're bringing more Spartans?" Wreav grunted in horrified disbelief.

"That, or they are calling for their terrorist friends." Nyreen suggested. "That just means we can't stand around anymore. Either this becomes a worse bloodbath than it is when their reinforcements arrive, or when the Hegemony reinforcements do." The other two commanders weren't sure if that was the greatest of ideas. They understood the logic behind it, yes. But they weren't exactly overjoyed by the prospect of facing a Spartan in close-quarters combat. "Well, unless either of you have better ideas?"

Kirrahe was about to protest, declaring the suicidal nature of the plan when lucky shot hit him between the eyes. Killing the STG captain instantly as his corpse fell to the ground. The sight of their intrepid superior dying shaking the resolve of the remaining STG agents.

Wreav could see it, and knew that their living troops were all too close to panicking. Moreover, if Kirrahe had been right the enemy probably had reinforcements on the way. They had to end the battle NOW.

"You heard him, there's more of those unholy monsters on the way!" Wreav shouted. "We move now!" Not even waiting to give an order, he leapt over his cover and charged for the entrance! The Krogan under his command, and a few salarians and turians following after him, discipline and training forgotten in both their fear and desire to kill Spartans.

"No, you idiots, get back!" Nyreen shouted, launching herself forward using her biotics.

But it was too late.

With Kirrahe dead and Wreav ordering an all out attack their defensive line was coming apart. Even some of Nyreen's own turian troops were following Wreav's example. While the rest looked uncertain and confused, hanging back while the others charged forward.

The krogan warriors were simply slaughtered as they charged forward. The legendary krogan toughness no match for Spartan-grade weapons. The STG operatives fared a little better, managing to dodge some of the Spartan attacks. While the few biotics that joined the charge had taken no damage at all so far. Their speed, agility, and the fact their enemies were in such a target rich environment protecting them

from harm for the moment.

But the Spartans had tricked them. As the special forces and their robotic minions charged ahead the human super soldiers moved around them. Explosives planted in the ceiling detonating just as Citadel troops moved into the area the Spartans had just occupied. The Spartans fleeing TOWARDS the formerly fortified position, tossing flashbangs and smoke grenades as ceiling caved in on the charging Council forces.

Wreav was buried under the rubble along with most those who had followed him. As Nyreen's remaining biotic troops realized that they alone stood between the Spartans and for them, the Spartans were more intent on getting out alive, then killing. Tossing more flashbangs and EMP grenades while laying down suppressing fire, forcing everyone to get down, deafened and blinded or risk getting shot.

As the dust cleared and their hearing and sight returned, it was very apparent just what exactly had happened.

The Spartans had escaped.

In the aftermath, as they cleaned up the damages the Spartans had wrought during their brief time here, it was apparent that whatever they may have done to the Spartans, their foes had come out far, ****far**** ahead. They had lost the Spartan corpse and equipment. None of the Spartans involved in the attack had died. Millions of credits lost in equipment, mechs and material, and valuable assets. Not to mention the death of many of the Hegemony's best and brightest. The few survivors suffering from PTSD and shellshock. Not to mention the death of almost all of the entire Citadel force. And as though the universe was adding insult to injury, they couldn't even find Nyreen's body.

****APUFMKII****

From his office within his underground bunker, the unofficial leader of the Hegemony observed footage of the Spartans escaping. Something he was able to see thanks to the Hegemony restoring communications with the Castle Facility (several hours after the Spartan infiltration).

The battle had been a complete disaster. The Spartan corpse and equipment his scientists had been studying was destroyed. Over four hundred Hegemony troops had died, and so had some of their best scientists. The number wasn't higher by the sheer fact that most had been patrolling the outside, rather than the inside. While the Castle Facility itself had sustained extensive damage.

The human terrorists and their rebel pawns were even more of a threat than he had anticipated. They might actually be able to overthrow the Hegemony if they weren't stopped soon.

But aside from the turians, none of the Council Races seemed fully committed to saving the Hegemony. Content to use the same sort of half measures they had employed against the batarian regime itself in the past (which had been equally unsuccessful).

'No...I can't afford to let those pigheaded fools on the Council bury this' Korra thought as he called the head of the Department of

Information Control.

The batarian male who answered was about as old as Datak Korra. But unlike Korra, he had become fat and infirm in his old age. But despite his physical weakness, the head of Information Control was of the few who felt confident enough to address the high admiral Korra almost like an equal (and Datak permitted it because the man was so good at his job, moreover he had been prominent in the Hegemony even longer than Korra himself had) saying simply "I'm guessing this is about that data you recently sent me."

"Yes Malik."

"Well, are you sure you want to go through with this Korra?"

"At this point we don't have a choice...show the galaxy just what the humans are doing."

"No one ever really liked Diego. Once he became a Spartan, he was arrogant, brash and had a massive ego. But he was still one of us, a Brother among Spartans. I guess we all forgot about that, in our moments. All of that is, except for him."

-Spartan Sarah Palmer's private journal, upon return from mission to deny Hegemony Forces UNSC assets.

****APUFMKII****

A/N: Well, people as you can see, the Hegemony has paid out its ass for killing a Spartan. Not only did they lose their 'spoils of war', they lost a lot of people. On the flipside though, they are learning how to fight better. For those of you wondering just what kind of bullets they were using for the shields, it was disruptor ammo. I figured it would be developed to counter Spartan shields rather than Geth Shields like in Mass Effect 2. Least by my understanding.

I've created a new story entry on my page for an update archive/codex for this story. Entries on the Spartans, Project Cerberus and the Timeline have been posted already. Next ones for the archive are the UNSC Navy and Small Arms. If you have any suggestions, drop them in a review on that archive story or PM them to me.

Remember to review for this one as well, thanks!

24. Shadow War: Realpolitik

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk. II

Chapter 24

Shadow War: Realpolitik

"The political battlefield is just as, and sometimes more so, important than the actual battlefield. For if you can not gain, or maintain your own allies, or deny allies to the enemy, you will quickly find yourself besieged from without, and then within."

-Lord Hood, on the topic of his new found political power.

Over a hundred rebels had died keeping Hegemony forces too confused and distracted to send reinforcements to the Castle Facility during the Spartan assault on the Castle. Yet the mood at the primary rebel camp (which at this point was a house owned by slavers that they had recently killed) remained upbeat. For what they had accomplished made it all worthwhile.

The Rebellion had broken into one of the Hegemony's most heavily guarded facilities, slaughtered some of their best scientists, denied the regime advanced alien technology, AND lived to tell about it. The sort of thing official government propaganda had always assured its people was impossible.

In short, they had utterly broken the gilded image of an unbreakable Hegemony that would stand forever.

The brutal batarian Hegemony had oppressed its people for centuries, residing like an eternal and immovable monster in the imaginations of the people it ruled through fear. But this victory had forever dispelled the Hegemony's aura of invincibility (at least amongst the rebels). And they had the Spartans to thank for it.

Were it not for the human super-soldiers, whose actions were changing the opinions of all within the Rebellion, even those who adamantly believed that the entire race was nothing but immoral monsters, there was very little doubt this entire movement would already be dead. Not even a footnote in the Hegemony's long history.

Now, they were gaining the reputation that they had among their fellow man during the Great War: of an immortal, near invulnerable race of warrior-gods. And for many, with them at their side, it seemed as though the Rebellion was already won.

Of course John Doe knew differently. He was troubled that all the other Spartans who had gone into the Castle had been seriously wounded (to the point that most of them were being shipped back to UNSC territory for treatment). It showed that this would not be an easy war, even for Spartans. Along with creeping doubts about the Spartan-IV program. He had come out virtually unscathed, so what did that say for the others?

He had also kept the knowledge that his Spartans had been so wounded away from the other Rebels. The only ones who knew the truth were Jella and her lover. Now he understood why ONI Section II had mandated that all Spartan-II casualties, be listed as Missing in Action(MIA) or Wounded in Action(WIA), but never Killed in Action(KIA).

And he could not deny, their reactions at the news had been somewhat odd.

Jella had been genuinely surprised. She had seen John and the others in action before, albeit limited. When they, or at least John and the one as tall as him, were moving, they became little more than blurs. And if you were their enemy, well it was a forgone conclusion.

But it didn't truly shock her. Jella was an incredibly pragmatic person, so she had never bought into the idea of an 'immortal warrior-race'. Even one artificially produced.

Her lover Cara, outwardly was equally surprised. Unlike Jella, she had bought into the notion of the Spartans being 'immortal' and 'invincible'. For the rest of the Rebels, it was a comforting thought. For her though, it was a terrifying notion. Because even though the asari maiden hated the Hegemony and thought it should be brought down, she couldn't forget that the humans were doing it weaken the Citadel Council.

'And what would they do once the Hegemony is brought down?' Cara uneasily wondered.

So when she had been told of the Spartans' grievous wounds, she was secretly happy. Not that she bore the individual Spartans any ill will, but considering the fact that she strongly suspected they would be used against her own people again, it was reassuring to know that they could die. Though the maiden tried to keep her feelings from showing.

John was never aware that Cara felt that way. Instead he was planning his next move. With those Spartans sent back home, home being Reach, it meant he need replacements. Kelly had been sent home as well. Thanks to a Black-cat Subprowler they had left behind for something like this.

He couldn't just call for more S-IVs, their last engagement just proved that they wouldn't be enough. Perhaps the S-IIIs or- "John, you awake?" The Spartan rose from the bed to see Cara at the door, a look of worry and trepidation etched on her face.

"Of course...what is it Cara?" the Spartan asked calmly. In truth, he was actually a bit surprised it was Cara of all people who checked on him, considering her opinions on humans. Still, it was a good sign he supposed.

"I...I was surfing the extranet with my omni-tool to see if anybody was reported anything on our attack on the Castle facility and I saw...something" Cara said hesitantly.

John was becoming genuinely concerned at this point. The only time he had seen Cara this nervous was when she had tried pulling a gun on him. What could unnerve somebody who regularly shared memories with Jella so?

At the unanswered question, Cara tapped her omnitool, John's lighting up soon after. Opening the message, it sent him straight to a video. No, not a video but a live feed. Showing a batarian male in full dress uniform standing next what was obviously a reporter.

"High Admiral Korra, you are known for avoiding the public eye. So much so that few outside of high ranking military and government positions ever see you face to face. Why the change now?"

"Well, the answer is indeed quite simple:" Datak began, smiling to the reporter. "With the increasing activities of these terrorists within our own borders, I thought it be best if I were to assure the fair and righteous people of the Hegemony that they have nothing to fear."

"And what of these reports of humans being involved?" The reporter questioned, though to John this starting to seem like it was almost

rehearsed, "We've all heard of evidence of human involvement. Including those like the ones who had kidnapped the Citadel Council several years ago."

"My dear, while that is true. We certainly have nothing to fear. These 'Spartans' as those troopers were called, are nothing when compared to the might of the Hegemony military. Or even it's paramilitary."

"But what of the rumors that one of these, as you call them, 'Spartans' had attacked a military base and caused considerable casualties?" the batarian female asked.

"Those rumors are highly exaggerated. If you do not believe me, I have the footage of the battle myself" Korra told the reporter.

The image abruptly changed to a scene from the battle yesterday. Showing Palmer recklessly charging the hulking Xero mech only to get knocked down. Screaming in agony as the powerful machine crushed her leg under its bulk. Then the image switched back to high admiral Datak Korra.

"Unfortunately that cowardly terrorist was able to crawl away before the authorities could capture her but not all of her comrades have been so fortunate" Korra said smoothly.

Then the image changed to show a Spartan recklessly taunting a batarian gunship. Arrogantly assuming it could do nothing to hurt him. Realizing at the last moment that the vehicle itself could become a weapon (if the pilot was angry and desperate enough) just become it smashed into and crushed him.

"As you can see, these 'Spartans' are not as terrifying or powerful as they initially appeared to be. I expect that many more of our fine soldiers will commit such a heroic action to bring down our enemies." Korra looked off camera, as though someone was signalling to him, and gave a curt nod. "Apologies, but I must cut this short. But before I go, I wish to reassure the people that soon, they will no longer have to worry about these terrorists and their actions will be little more than a memory." With that he stepped off camera, focusing back on the reporter.

But John Doe was no longer paying attention, his mind busy working through the implications of what he had just seen.

The paranoid and secretive Hegemony had just done what nobody involved in Operation Spartacus had predicted. In fact the sort of thing ONI analysts and planners had assumed couldn't happen. It had deliberately brought its conflict with the Spartans to the public eye.

Now the public in Council space (and soon New Covenant and UNSC space) knew that the Spartans were trying to overthrow the Hegemony. Perhaps more importantly, now they also knew that Spartans could die.

****APUFMKII****

The governing board for the Sons of Impera had been very busy lately. The humans just seemed so willing to give the hate group more and

more ammunition for their propaganda machine. This latest news from the Hegemony in particular seemed like a gift from the gods to many members of the board as they gathered at their headquarters on Palaven for their daily meeting.

"All we have to do is remind people that the humans are trying to overthrow an Associate Race's government and they'll come flocking to us." Abrudas Acton, their head of PR predicted.

"And you're an idiot to even consider that!" The Chairman retorted before anyone could even express their agreements. "They may be trying to overthrow an Associate Race's standing government, but the moment people learn that it's the Hegemony they are trying to overthrow they'll be split between cheering for the humans or outright ignoring it. Especially any families with colonists, who've doubtlessly have lost some members to slavers."

"I think you're ignoring just how much of a game-changer the public seeing a Spartan die IS! people hate the Hegemony, but they also hate and fear humanity. And the batarians are showing that even the humans most powerful warriors CAN be killed by us." Acton shot back, upset that Pallin Jared had called her an idiot.

"I will not debate that point. What I am calling you out on, is your naive belief that this proof will suddenly bring all of the Associate Races under our fold." Pallin explained. "Tell me, just why do you think that people who have lost family members to slavers, probably hired or funded by the Hegemony, will suddenly start supporting that government?"

Acton honestly could not think of an answer to that question.

"Then what do you suggest Jared?" their treasurer, Treeya Nyxeris asked.

"More than we have been, that is for certain." For all their fervor and energy when their organization had first began, many if not most, who wanted public action, were now more content with simply influencing the public and perhaps playing with politics. Simply put, they have become lax in their efforts. "There is the option of supporting the Hegemony militarily, but I do not favor the political ramifications of such a decision."

Acton actually laughed at that. Jeering "if you're worried about the public hating the Hegemony too much to care about humanity stabbing the batarian nation in the back why the fuck would you think its a good idea to send our own people it fight the Hegemony?"

"Besides Jared were a political action group not a military or even paramilitary organization" Chazzik Jaroth, a salarian who was beginning to show his age protested.

"And therein you see my problem" the chairman said passionately.

While the Sons of Impera had risen from humble beginnings to become a vast organization with local branches throughout most of Citadel space, it still hadn't quite lived up to its founder's expectations. When Jared created the Sons he had dreams of using it to one day take on (and defeat) the humans directly. Instead he spent virtually all

his time trying to influence public opinion and playing politics.

"Why would we even consider forming any sort of paramilitary?" Someone questioned, "Aside from the costs of creating and the legal matters, do we even have the capabilities of creating, let alone maintaining, one?"

"We actually have more than enough members with military training to form a decent sized militia." another board member pointed out.

Which wasn't that surprising when you thought about it. Although there were plenty of asari, salarians, and krogan in the Sons, there well still more turians in the group than any other species, and virtually all turians endured a period of military service (as they did their duty to Hierarchy). Providing the Sons with a relatively large and skilled labor pool to form their own paramilitary division.

"But is it worth the political backlash?" Treeya added. "I've been tracking the numbers, and funding has been dwindling. If it keeps up or gets worse, our options are going to become seriously limited."

For Treeya this covered both the professional and the personal. Unlike most of the board who been of relatively humble means when they joined (and had acquired wealth and prominence as the Sons star rose) she had already been wealthy, and had used her fortune to help build up the Sons. Moreover Treeya alienated all her remaining friends and family thanks to her association with the hate group. If the Sons fell, this once wealthy woman would be left with nothing.

"Well we can't just the humans run amok. Even if we can't be seen doing it publicly we can-"

"Well, what if we could do it publicly?" A quiet voice asked.

Everybody looked at Voldis Tartam in surprise. The old turian warrior hardly ever spoke during these meetings. In fact he had generally been very quiet ever since he had lost his whole family when Impera was destroyed. But they let him stay because having a genuine war hero (he had saved his entire unit during the Siege of Palaven) on the board was good for their PR. Besides, the chairman honestly respected him, because Jared had always wanted to be a great warrior when he was a child.

"We never have to get involved ourselves. Rather we can have, someone else act in our stead."

"What are you talking about, old man?" Jared asked, annoyed at how everybody on his own board seemed to be disagreeing with him.

"He's talking about mercenaries, right?" Acton guessed aloud.

"Not, necessarily. Though they are an option." Voldis began to explain. "Why not have a splinter faction? A supposed 'extremist' sect?"

"Oh...a deniable asset...like the Union and the STG right?" Treeya replied, warming up to the idea now that she knew what Voldis was talking about.

"To an extent, yes. They would still embody our political beliefs, however they would be far more militant than us obviously. Those who wish to act against the humans peacefully would join us, while those with more militant inclinations would join the splinter faction. Officially, we would probably disavow and separate ourselves from the group. When in reality, they are completely under our command."

"I want to do a study to see how feasible this is" the chairman ordered.

Although in reality he had already made up his mind to do as Voldis suggested. He simply brought up the study to end any further argument about it until the Sons were definitely committed. Looking at the beautiful treasurer as he thought of ways to ensure that this new project got the funding it needed.

****APUFMKII****

Over the centuries, the Batarian Hegemony had done many things to upset the Citadel Council. But this was perhaps the first time the Hegemony (which had reputation amongst the other Associate Races as untrustworthy) had done so by being too honest. A fact that Tevos, Valdn, Wrex, and Cicero brooded over as they awaited the arrival of the batarian ambassador (who they had summoned to appear before them).

As ambassador Jath'Amon entered the audience chamber, the batarian official appeared perfectly at ease. Despite the fact that he couldn't help but be aware of the fact that the Council was upset with the Hegemony. But perhaps that shouldn't have been surprising, after all, much like the government he represented, Jath'Amon was nothing if not arrogant.

"I'm guessing you know why you're here." Councilor Wrex growled down at the batarian.

"I assumed it had something to do with High Admiral Korra's recent public announcement." the ambassador replied cheerfully. In truth, the press release itself had been quite the shock to Jath as well, let alone the fact that the admiral had broadcasted it across the entirety of Citadel space and the Terminus systems.

"I should say so...the whole point of sending special forces to aid your own troops was so that the insurrection could be ended quickly and quietly." Valdn replied with unusual bluntness.

"Unfortunately that plan seems to be failing. Thus my government has been forced to take more radical measures." the ambassador stated coolly.

The Councilors all wanted to argue with Jath'Amon but couldn't. The asari commandos sent to the Hegemony had been virtually wiped out. So had the STG agents sent, and the krogan warriors. The turian special forces had fared better overall, but their leader Nyreen was still MIA and currently presumed KIA. And to add insult to injury, the

special forces hadn't managed to get one confirmed kill against the Spartans.

"Demanding more from your neighbors at this point seems unwise ambassador." Tevos said as neutrally as she could.

"You are correct Councilor...my nation does need to reach out to its allies at this difficult time...which is why from this point forward the Batarian Hegemony is ceasing the importation of all slaves" Jath'Amon announced with a dramatic gesture.

The Councilors shared nervous looks, not at all assured by the way the ambassador had spoken. "And just how do you plan on fulfilling such a promise?" Wrex all but demanded. "Aside from your own people, I'm certain that the slavers will not be so willing to entertain such a promise."

"Once the turian fleet the Hierarchy promised FINALLY arrives in Hegemony space it can monitor activity to ensure that slaves are not being imported from outside the Hegemony...and of course any armies from our other allies could also assist in this effort." Jath'Amon replied smoothly. "And any slavers that you should find, well aside from us rejecting them, there is little else we can do."

"And should we find that there are still more slaves being 'imported'?" Tevos pressed.

"Then you can punish the guilty parties with the Hegemony's blessing...in fact we already preparing to look out for such behavior." the ambassador answered. "If you so wish, once your forces arrive, you may station them at auction houses for your own reassurance."

The Councilors all looked at one another. It seemed that (contrary to all experience and expectations) the Hegemony was serious about ending slave raids against its neighbors. Which was the source of most (but certainly not all) of the animosity the other Citadel Races felt towards the Hegemony. It was a truly radical move from the normally conservative and uncompromising batarian regime.

There was only one person in the Hegemony ready, willing, and able to bring about such a huge change in official policy.

High Admiral Datak Korra.

Cicero said what they were all thinking when he asked "how did Datak Korra convince that Senate of yours to ever do such a thing?...WE'VE been trying to get them to stop importing slaves for centuries!"

Valdn and Tevos were annoyed by the turian's undiplomatic (and in their view unprofessional) bluntness. Nevertheless, they still eagerly leaned forward to hear what the ambassador had to say.

"You are mistaken Councilor...the high admiral is just a military official...Senate and the President set official policy for the Hegemony" Jath'Amon replied stiffly, to which almost everybody in the room (including the Councilors many guards) simply rolled their eyes.

"Very well then." Vald'n began. "While are gracious for such a...gift...should you actually maintain this promise of yours, perhaps once this insurrection has been extinguished, we can discuss other matters." The implications of those last few words were clear. Defeat the humans, and the Hegemony would have a chance at joining the Council.

"I understand completely Honored Councilors...of course it will be even easier to achieve this objective once your military aid arrives." Jath'Amon replied in a voice that was as sweet and smooth as an artificial dessert. Telling the Councilors in his own indirect way that actually stopping the importation of slaves was conditional on the Council Races active participation in ending the slave revolt.

"Though I must ask, Councilor Tevos, why are you not in person today?"

It was a legitimate question, as the Asari representative was attending remotely. Something highly out of character for any of the Councilors, but for her more so. In fact, this probably the first time that anyone, even some krogan and asari, saw her doing this.

"I'm afraid that is classified ambassador as it concerns the national security of the Asari Republics...but I can assure you that if my current mission is a success it will improve all our fortunes." Tevos replied with an enigmatic smile.

****APUFMKII****

Since the end of the Great War, and the following wars thereafter, there were attempts to try and foster feelings of, if not friendship, then camaraderie between humans and the Covenant races. Such attempts were usually centered around large scale projects. Terraforming, colonization, mining, etc.

Many of these projects falling through more often than not, thanks to animosity between the two factions. It was hard to throw away such feelings when working with those who tried for the better part of several decades to exterminate your entire species.

Though not all of these projects had failed. Enter the joint UNSC/New Covenant Space station, the Unyielding Oliphant. The first, and only of its kind. A massive space station dwarfed only by a CSO-Class supercarrier and High Charity, it was built with both human and Covenant engineering and designs. And quite possibly, the most heavily defended fortress in the stars, not including High Charity. Not including its already incredible firepower built in, there was a sizeable joint UNSC/New Covenant fleet safeguarding it.

Though the division between them was obvious, as the ships stayed with their own.

Inside the station it was more so. Aside from sections that catered to the special needs of some races, such as climate controlled areas for Kig-yar and Sangheili, and methane enriched areas for Unggoy, there were what were called 'zones' that only humans or Covenant races were present. As the station was staffed by both UNSC/UEG and New Covenant military.

Needless to say, this lead to some rather 'awkward', for lack of a better word, encounters. Though this was somewhat lessened as 'fresh blood', or those not tainted by the Great War, grew up and came to the station.

And, being located directly between UNSC and Covenant territories, it was a great place for military leaders with knowledge of it, to conduct private meetings. Away from any prying eyes. Which was why Lord Hood and the Arbiter had agreed to meet there.

"So," Hood poured himself a drink, an increasingly common act for him when dealing with politics, "Thel, I'm very grateful you decided to meet with me. I assume your ambassador passed on my message?"

"Yes but I am honestly not certain what point this meeting serves...I only agreed to come here out of respect for what you have done in the past." Thel replied coldly.

"Yes, and for that I am grateful." Hood admitted as he took his drink. "I'd offer you some, but I'm not entirely sure if your species could process it." Taking a few sips he continued, "I assume that you wish to know how the Office of Naval Intelligence managed to-"

"So thoroughly pull the cloak over your head, yes." Thel interrupted. "I had always believed that you permitted their actions, or at most, were unaware of the scale they were taking place."

"Like Denton said, I was utterly unaware of what Margaret was doing." Hood tried to explain. "ONI has always been operating with its own authority, even before the war between your kind and mine began. I only found out because they got sloppy." He finished the drink before looking at Thel in the eye. "Besides, I am not the only who, as you said, 'had the cloak pulled over my head'." Referring to the Heretics, and Jul's sleeper agents.

"True but the Office of Naval Intelligence is supposedly answerable to you." Thel retorted.

"That's unofficially." Hood explained. "Officially, she's her own boss until someone else is placed in charge of the UNSC, officially. We lost a lot of good people in the war, and I had to take their responsibilities, yes. But I didn't always receive their power."

"Do you not have people to watch over your internal affairs?"

"_Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" _When Thel signed that he didn't understand, Hood translated. "It's latin, for 'who watches the watchmen?'"

"It was supposed to ONI, Section 0. But they've been made toothless from the war, and it's being a trying time to have them regain their power and resume their responsibilities."

"So you are telling me that you cannot control ONI." the Arbiter said heavily. Losing a little respect for Hood as he said the words. Because whatever the New Covenant's other faults, ambiguity over who was in charge was not one of them.

"That _used_ to be the case, yes." Terrence admitted, "But not

anymore. I've ordered her to cease all activity against you, and have taken steps to ensure that she follows those orders. She knows the consequences if she tries to cross me now."

"And when she inevitably defies you and we find ONI agents attempting to spawn strife and chaos in our Covenant?" Thel asked skeptically.

"Aside from you being free to do with them as you wish?" Terrence asked, getting a surprised nod in return. Thel had expected to argue for that right, not just to be handed to him so easily. "There are only two conditions: the first is that you keep it quiet. In so much that the civilian populaces of both our nations are left unawares. The second that is that I am notified of all agents. There will be some I wish to preserve, like Denton. He's ONI, but has no loyalty to Margaret."

"That is...acceptable." Thel replied slowly, trying to mask his surprise at winning such large concessions so quickly and easily.

The development made the Arbiter briefly contemplate demanding the head of Margaret Parangosky herself. But he was nearly certain that Lord Hood wouldn't and/or couldn't hand the head of ONI over. So he decided to move onto other matters.

"There have been news spreading from the Citadel Systems, through my people who are willing to try and make a life there." Thel began. "Of humans, even your De-Spartans being seen assisting in an insurrection within the Batarian Hegemony. I must ask, what reason is there for this? I do not, as so many do, believe that they are acting of their own accord." Thel looked at his human counterpart, "Another of ONI's schemes?"

"Honestly yes...Operation Spartacus is an ONI campaign to overthrow the slavocratic regime in the Batarian Hegemony and create a free, democratic, and friendly nation in its place...they began it without my knowledge or permission but at this point we are committed." Hood admitted.

"And what did the Hegemony do to provoke such aggression?" Thel asked coldly.

"Nothing...beyond being an murderous, xenophobic, warlike, and treacherous regime that would living on our borders that would inevitably clash with us" the admiral answered honestly.

"So, this is NOT an attempt to bring down a nation to take into your fold?" Thel demanded to know, it appearing to him as though ONI was still up to its old tricks (it had simply decided to pick on a target other than the New Covenant for the moment).

"I promise you, it is not."

Though Thel doubted the sincerity of Hood's words, or at least the true nature of ONI's plan, he could deny he approved on some level. In many ways, the values and practices of the Hegemony were sickening. Not just to him, but many of the Covenant. Were circumstances different, he would have been tempted to simply take a fleet to that territory and begin glassing worlds until the Hegemony

as it was, had fallen.

Unfortunately, with the New Covenant in its current weakened state, human aggression towards its neighbors had to be discouraged as much as possible. Considering the state of relations between the New Covenant and humanity, any major UNSC gains at the expense of the Citadel Council could also be considered a loss for Thel's own people.

"While we are on the subject of the Citadel races," Hood started as he poured himself another drink. "I have heard from Denton that the quarians are working within your embassy now. Has something occurred?"

"Yes...the Quarians accidentally stumbled into our territory some time ago...we sympathized with a people who had been abandoned and betrayed by those they called allies" Thel stated with a sharp look at Hood. Then he continued in a calmer tone "and after they had proved themselves an asset we welcomed them into our Covenant."

"Well, that is interesting." Hood was really impressed. "I did not think that you would so willing to accept them. I assume that they have been made Covenant citizens in every sense of the word." Thel nodded. "I'll make sure when I get back that they are protected under the usual clauses."

"Yes, considering the discrimination that they faced within the Citadel system that will be a welcome change for them." Thel said thoughtfully.

"Since I've put all my cards on the table I don't suppose you could tell me anything about how you successfully integrated Mass Effect technology into your ships?" Lord Hood asked. Fairly certain that Quarian help was the answer to that question, but wanting to see how much the Arbiter would give him on this point.

"Perhaps, perhaps not." Thel answered cryptically. "Though it will not shame me to admit that they have gone above and beyond to prove themselves to us. It is actually, inspiring, their efforts."

Hood could figure out that Thel meant the Quarians. The admiral knew that the Arbiter was an forthright individual who respected honesty. So he decided to simply ask the alien leader.

"What would it take for you to share this technology with us."

"Margaret Parangosky's head and that of her chief followers as well as concrete proof that the Office of Naval Intelligence shall not attack us in the future." Thel replied. Deciding that such a bold question deserved an equally blunt answer.

Lord Hood simply nodded at that. Giving the Arbiter a brief but respectful farewell and then left. Because as much as he sometimes loathed the woman, he knew that he couldn't simply surrender Parangosky to the Covenant races. Her services during the Great War had earned her at least that much consideration.

****APUFMKII****

Thessia was one of the most heavily populated and urbanized planets in the galaxy. Yet there were still undeveloped and wild areas where nature's dominance was unchallenged. Areas that had been walled off and protected by the Powers That Be in order to preserve some of Thessia's wildlife and natural beauty. Or regions that were simply too harsh and inhospitable for settlement to be practical.

The Abbas Desert was perhaps the best example of this. It was a dry and arid region where only the most rugged of creatures could survive. A harsh wasteland that nobody had been crazy enough to try settling.

Except the Justicars.

An ancient fortress from the pre-Spaceflight era of the asari, the stone structure still standing tall and as intimidating as when it was first erected. Made to last, the inside was kept up to date to provide the Justicars with all the assets necessary to fulfill their self-appointed mission, while the walls remained as they had when first made.

As the closest thing they had to a holy structure, and as their headquarters, no outsiders were allowed to land their vessels within a hundred meters of the fortress. Any who wished to visit the Justicars were to walk the distance to the facility. This alone was enough to put off most asari from approaching.

Tevos clung tightly to her cloak in an effort to try to block the heat and the sand as she trekked to the facility. As did her small entourage of assistants. It would have taken mere minutes for Tevos and her people to have reached the fortress if they had taken one of the Councilor's personal vehicles. But everyone who wished to speak to the senior Justicars had to approach on foot. There were no exceptions to this rule, not even for Citadel Councilors on urgent business.

As they made it to the front doors, four Justicars stood guard. Wearing the ceremonial armor associated with their sect within the Justicar Order: The Guardians. The history behind these four were well known to the asari. The Guardians were the Justicars who had accomplished whatever mission they had appointed themselves when joining the Justicars, and rather than to continue roving the galaxy, they stayed here as protectors.

Guarding the fortress, helping train prospective Justicars, and assisting their leader in whatever way she required. The sight of the Guardians showed that this was the heart of the Justicar Order, and for all her experience, sophistication, and cynicism (developed over centuries of participating in galactic politics) Councilor Tevos couldn't suppress a twinge of superstitious awe and dread as she approached their doorstep. Knowing that she was about to ask these legendary figures for something that went against their very Code.

'But I have no choice...without their aid our enemies and allies will make us give up on the peaceful society our foremothers worked so long and hard to develop' Tevos thought as she stood before the Guardians. Saying with as much solemnity (tired and sweaty as she

was) as she could muster "I humbly ask for an audience with the eldest daughters of Athame."

The traditional Request was answered with the traditional Reply from the lead Guardian.

"Who are you to seek a meeting with the Justicars Eldest and Most Honored?"

"I am a leader of the people humbling asking for the blessing and aid of the Order." Tevos replied solemnly. Having memorized the proper response days ago. Hoping that they would not turn her away at the door (as the Justicars had to do to those they considered unworthy in the past).

But the Guardians simply nodded their heads in approval (pleased with her knowledge of the Old Ways). Saying in perfect unison "You may pass."

One of the Guardians led the Councilor and her entourage inside as the others stayed at their post. The interior of the fortress was filled with trophies, art, and relics from Thessia's early history. Before the asari had met the other races. Back when the daughters of Thessia were still violently divided, warlike, and (relatively) savage. A history the asari people in general had largely forgotten, and some liked to think never happened, but that the Justicars keenly remembered.

Not Tevos nor any in her entourage spoke as they passed the relics. It felt almost sacrilegious to break the silence that permeated the hall. A hall that was largely empty, Tevos silently remarked. Aside from those guarding the gates, she had seen only only a half dozen Justicars walking the Halls. All of them had paused for a moment to spare a glance at the Councilor before going about their business.

She had shuddered slightly when she had noticed them. Even in this calm environment, it felt like there was a weight on her soul and was being judged.

As a well educated and informed asari, Tevos was keenly aware of the influential role the Justicars had played in the formation of the Asari Republics (including clashes with what would one day become known as the STG when their people had first met the salarians). Moreover, even though the Justicar Order's influence had dwindled since the asari had expanded beyond Thessia and begun to mingle (often intimately) with the other races, Tevos knew that the Justicars still played a vital role in limiting corruption in asari society, and maintaining the status quo.

Despite the Order's desire to punish all injustice, the Order had neither the numbers nor the other resources to effectively police asari space (or even just Thessia itself). Instead the Justicars tended to target the most prominent and obviously evil people in asari space. So that anyone in the Asari Republics who moved too aggressively to gain power or influence risked the scrutiny (and potential wrath) of the Justicars.

And no Justicar's wrath was more feared than Matriarch Abene's. She had led the Order for longer than Tevos had been alive. Longer than

any other asari had been alive. Leading the Justicars to victory against everyone who had openly opposed the Order. Ensuring that the Justicars vision of How Society Ought To Be remained a dominant one.

Something Tevos was all too aware of as she was led to Abene's inner sanctum. A large but spartan set of rooms in in the very heart of the fortress. With two more Guardians barring the path of Tevos and her people. Their guide leaving without a word (to go back to her post outside) as the Guardians by the door bluntly told Tevos. "Only you may enter."

One of her aids began to protest. "Ma'am! You can't be serious? We-" The young matron was hushed, not by the Justicar, but by Tevos.

"Silence Boyana. This is not the place for your vanity or pride." Tevos said with unusually harsh bluntness. Not wanting her aid to embarrass her. Her bodyguards in the group simply gave the Councilor meaningful looks. In response to which Tevos simply shook her head as she replied "I will be fine...the Justicars are honorable warriors and I have nothing to fear from them."

No one else thought to protest and silently stepped back. But as Tevos entered the inner sanctum of the Justicars alone she wasn't actually certain of that. Remembering all the stories she had heard about the Justicars in general (and Abene's in particular) intolerance for anything they saw as evil and/or corrupt. Seeing it as their sacred mission to root out and destroy evil in the name of their goddess (which all asari had once worshipped).

Tevos had never murdered or raped anyone. But over her long political career she had made many decisions that were morally dubious at best. Including supporting the Batarian Hegemony. Which was the very thing that she HAD to talk to Abene about.

The thought of being judged by Matriarch Abene sent a chill down the Councilor's spine. If the Matriarch thought that Tevos had violated the Justicar code in any way. Literally, any way, she would be lucky to leave the chamber alive.

"No, if they killed a Councilor while she was meeting with them on official business it could bring the wrath of all the Council Races down on their heads...surely even the Justicars would never do anything so insane." Tevos thought as she tried to maintain her composure.

But the asari Councilor knew that the Justicars were fanatically devoted to their goddess and the code of behavior that governed every aspect of their lives. And if there was one thing fanatics were NOT known for, it was being reasonable.

Before she entered the Sanctum, she wasn't sure exactly what to expect. It wasn't as though she was dealing with a fellow politician. So the sight that greeted her was a surprise.

Despite her fearsome reputation Matriarch Abene was a relatively small woman. Her body wiry rather than muscular. Her ancient form still looking fit and vigorous, dressed in a simple white robe as she sat at a large desk. Her appearance did not betray the scale of her

power.

But what she had created did. Six perfect spheres, all pulsing with biotic energy, swam around the room. Light contrails of dark energy left behind in their wake as they flew, in an almost whimsical manner. As though they were young children playing games with each other. Several came dangerously close to Tevos, who stood stock still, too terrified to move. One stopped in front of her face, like it was watching her before it continued on its path. Tevos let out the breath she had been holding in.

She had heard the rumors, but until now had never known them to be true. The spheres floating around were the ultimate expression of an asari's power: pure and condensed biotic energy. Capable of being formed by only the strongest of matriarchs. Requiring extreme levels of concentration, the sphere was formed between an asari's hands, coalescing together. But they were supposed to be nearly transparent, similar to an aurora. Dissipating the moment the concentration was broken, and the hands separated.

But the ones floating around were blue, a very deep blue.

A visual sign that Tevos was facing a very unique type of asari.

No one knew exactly how old Matriarch Abene was (except perhaps the Matriarch herself). She had been born either during or before the Rachni Wars, and the records of her birth (like many records from that time) were lost. But unlike all the other veterans of that terrible conflict, she was still alive because her mastery of biotics was so great that she was able to slow down the asari aging process even further. She was over three thousand years old and still going strong. Many asari (including some Justicars) seemed to think that she was immortal.

The head of the Order seemed to finally notice Tevos. Staring straight at the Councilor as her biotic spheres disappeared. Her measuring gaze making the Councilor feel uncomfortable as Abene gracefully got to her feet.

"Welcome, Councilor. To what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting?"

Now that the moment of truth had come Tevos found herself characteristically at a loss for words. One issue was that she wasn't quite sure how to address Abene. Officially everyone in the Order was considered equal, 'rank' was determined by seniority and accomplishment. Abene led the Order by virtue of her greater seniority and all her many accomplishments. Tevos wanted to be as polite and respectful as possible, but she wasn't sure that Abene HAD any titles other than matriarch.

"Matriarch Abene, thank you for meeting with me on such short notice." Tevos finally said. "I apologize for the abruptness of my request, but I-"

"Felt that it was important enough that traditional norms needed to be set aside." Abene finished. "Please, take a seat." After Tevos had taken the proffered seat, Abene immediately asked, "Now, please be direct, why are you here?"

But Tevos was a politician to the bone. Moreover, she was unusually nervous. So instead of being direct she said, "It is about the Batarian Hegemony...have you been following current events?"

"To an extent." Abene replied neutrally. "It seems that the Hegemony is finally beginning to receive their comeuppance."

"And if the Hegemony was simply being undermined by their own people I would rejoice but it is being subverted by the humans...the same human who rampaged throughout Citadel space and destroyed the world of Impera for no reason" Tevos explained.

"And what of it?" Abene questioned. "The humans may be aiding these 'terrorists', as you call them, but they have not declared war. A caged mind can only suffer for so long, before it begins to lash out."

"But the humans are trying to grow in power and strength at our expense. No one will mourn the Hegemony if it falls, but then what? If we let them take the batarian nation, it will only wet their appetite for more conquests and shake the Associate Races' faith in the system" Tevos argued.

"And what would you ask of us? The Code is clear on this. We can not allow the stripping of sapients of their rights and freedom, turned into little more than chattel. But neither can we infringe upon the sovereignty of other nations." Adene rebuked. "Our Code, is the only reason why the Justicars have not taken actions against the Hegemony. If the humans had formally declared war, and were violating the rights of sapients, perhaps we would involve ourselves. But by their words, and that of the Batarians, this is an internal affair. And both our Code and honor, refuses the reason, for the continuance of slavery."

"Matriarch I know that the Hegemony is vile but if you don't help us oppose the humans necessity and our allies will force the Republics to militarize...rejecting the accomplishments of our foremothers" Tevos pleaded.

"Such actions are long since overdue, Tevos." At the Councilor's shocked reaction, she explained. "The asari have been coddled, by both my Order and the other Races. Being waited on hand and foot, serving as your protectors, while you reaped the benefits. It is time we reclaimed our former glory and strength, not continue to ride upon the dresses of our ancestors."

"As for the Batarians, as I said before, the Order will NOT aid those whose values are in direct contention with the Code."

"Being the galaxy's peacemakers and diplomats is a noble profession!" Tevos shot back. So surprised and angry by what Abene was saying that her calm and professional veneer was slipping.

Adene didn't so much as twitch as she replied. "And so when war comes, as it always does, it is noble to let the sons and daughters pay the price of blood, while we keep our daughters coddled and safe?" Before Tevos could reply, she continued, "Child, and do not try to argue that, you are a child to me. The Justicars have not involved themselves in politics, not because of our waning influence, but because it was our choice. We decided to let you lead yourselves."

Having thought that the asari had matured enough that we could trust them to govern yourselves without our guidance. An allowance we made too soon, evidently."

"What?" Tevos said in shock, hoping that she had misheard the ancient matriarch.

Instead of answering, Adene continued. "Perhaps, it is time for the Order to return to society. I am sure that many of Thessia's daughters would rejoice at the our return to prominence."

"What...what do you mean matriarch?" the Councilor asked. But in truth she knew exactly what Abene was getting at. Tevos just didn't want to admit it to herself.

"Exactly what I am saying, Tevos. I do not think I need to explain myself any further."

"But we still-" Tevos began to say, only to be rudely interrupted.

"Please, see yourself out, Child." Small orbs began appearing around Abene as she re-entered her meditation.

Other than when she was kidnapped by the Spartans, Tevos had never been treated with such disrespect when acting in her official capacity as Citadel Councilor. But the humans had been enemies. The Justicars were 'supposed' to be on same side.

As Tevos crossed the threshold of the room, she heard the Matriarch's last words. "And Child, you need not come all the way here to communicate with us in the future. I shall be sending my most trusted student to the Citadel once she finishes her current mission."

Tevos shuddered as she left Matriarch Abene's sanctum to rejoin her companions. Her anxiety and worry plain to them all. For Tevos now knew that the debris from Impera appeared to be waking up the slumbering dragon the Justicar Order represented. And that she would have to consider the Justicars an enemy.

"Power is a fickle thing. It comes and go at its whim. And more often than not, it will come to those who do not want it, and leave those who desire it."

-Thel Vadam.

Author's Note:

A/N:(aDarkOne) We realize that there's nothing in ME canon about being able to use biotics to slow down the aging process. But we decided to change some things for the sake of the story. As for whether or not the matriarch can live up to her hypeâ€|will be revealed in later chapters.

25. Shadow War: The Turning

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk. II

Chapter 25

Shadow War: The Turning

"_Which is our greatest enemy? That which we create from without, or the ones that threaten us from within?"_

**-Unknown. **

Private Bala Avinash was like many other turian soldiers currently doing a tour of duty on the batarian homeworld. Although reasonably well trained and equipped, he lacked any real combat experience. But his superiors didn't see that as a problem.

While the combat prowess of the Spartans was undeniable, the Powers That Be in the Turian Hierarchy saw the average rebel as nothing more than armed thugs. Dangerous in large numbers or unfavorable circumstances, but no real match for the soldiers of the Hierarchy.

Bala had initially been excited when he heard that he was being sent to Kar'Shan. Like most outsiders, he had nothing but disdain for the self-serving, brutal, and xenophobic Hegemony. But he regarded the batarian rebels as nothing more than terrorists/collaborators who were in league with the same monsters that had destroyed Impera, a widespread sentiment that was being encouraged by the turian officers on Kar'Shan. However, so far Bala's service in the batarian capital city had been uneventful.

The fact that he and his squad had seen almost no action was considered to be a curse by some, and a blessing by others. While the majority of the turians now stationed here actually wanted a firefight with the Rebels, others simply wanted to gun down any batarian seen with a turian slave following them. The near legendary discipline of the Turian Hierarchy military being the only thing keeping them from doing so.

Except for the Historic District and the neighborhoods where the wealthy lived, Overseer City was generally an ugly and depressing place. With the lower castes living in old rundown dwellings. Even the newer buildings built for the non-elite tended decay quickly, due to the fact that they were cheaply constructed and poorly maintained.

It was also where the Hierarchy had established its current base of operations. The Hegemony not willing to let them establish a military presence in the more, 'respectable' cities, for fear of 'spooking the local populace'. Not that it actually did anything in terms of keeping the civilians separate from the turians. The sheer population density in the lower caste regions meant that it was literally impossible for the turians to avoid interacting with them on some level.

Most of the locals regarded the turian soldiers with suspicion and fear. Government propaganda taught them to view all outsiders/non-batarians with mistrust. While experience had taught them that soldiers could, and all too often would, intimidate, harm, and exploit the civilians around them with impunity. As clearly both alien outsiders AND soldiers, the turian troops were seen as untrustworthy and dangerous on multiple levels.

So far, nothing had come of the animosity, at least in Bala's area. Harsh words and dark looks had been shared, but otherwise, the interactions had stayed calm and peaceful. The people around them too cowed and intimidated to show any overt hostility to those who were clearly stronger. Though it also meant that they were denied almost entirely a source of intel. Without the locals willing to talk to them, it meant that everyone was a potential threat. In the literal sense. Barring Hegemony officers and military, it was impossible to tell to who was, and who wasn't, a terrorist.

Bala checked his omnitool to see the time. Marking it, he checked to make sure his Phaeston was set before heading for the checkpoint, well it was a glorified gate to be honest. Seeing the rest of his squad, he tapped off a quick salute before joining them.

"You're late private." Bala's sargeant said irritably.

"By only a few seconds." Bala protested.

"Late is late. If it happens again I'll give you an official reprimand." the sergeant said unsympathetically.

It was clearly unfair considering that most of the squad was getting as they were speaking. But as the newest, youngest, and least experienced soldier in the squad, Bala got more grief from his comrades and superior than anybody else. It was pretty common for the new guy to get short end of the stick in this situation, but for Avinash, whose head had been filled with dreams of glory when he first came to Kar'Shan, it seemed dreadfully unfair.

"C'mon scrub." The sergeant waved the squad towards the gate. "We've got another boring patrol to get to."

****APUFMKII****

As Bala and his patrol were moving through the streets of Paradise Grove, a neighbor inside the city, keeping an eye out for anyone potentially hostile. The name was a complete oxymoron. Paradise Grove was one of the oldest and most rundown neighborhoods in Overseer City, many of its buildings were centuries old and it showed, garage was left lying in the street, and beggars appeared to fill every other corner. A visual testament to the misery the Hegemony had brought to the vast majority of its people.

The turian squad never realized that they were being watched by more than just beggars and the destitute. Inside the buildings around them, Rebels ran across the floors. Holes torn in walls and between tight knit buildings allowing them to follow the turian patrol.

"Hey, Rakus you sure you're okay with this?" Grot, a salarian rebel asked. "I mean, they are your own people after all."

"I'll be fine." Rakus, a middle-aged turian answered. "The Hierarchy abandoned me and my family years ago. I know what the humans did, but at least they don't abandon their allies because its convenient. Far as I'm concerned, the Hierarchy I served is dead." Rakus's opinion was one shared by most of the other turians in the Rebellion. Even those who had been born into slavery and never even seen a Hierarchy

world.

Of course the few turian slaves who had originally been from Impera felt differently. But the handful who had ended up in the Rebellion couldn't cause much trouble. Instead they either tried to strike out on their own, and were recaptured by the Hegemony, or killed by the Rebels when it seemed like those turians were going to betray the Rebellion.

Rakus held up a hand as they were about to reach the end of the block, and thus the houses as well. "Contact the other squad, tell them to stop opposite our position. Tell me once they've confirmed." He told Grot. "Everyone else, check your weapons." As he heard weapons cocking their weapons, he checked his omnitool. Reading the message. 'Spicer Mine: Alpha: Primed. Beta: Primed. Sigma: Primed.'

When he looked to Grot, he signaled that the other Rebels had received the orders and were waiting for the pre-agreed signal. Peeking out the window, he watched as the turian patrol walked down the street.

The one at the head, probably the squad leader, Rakus mused, wasn't paying attention to where he walked. Missing the little rod sticking up out of the ground. Neither did anyone else in the squad. Still walking, the sergeant was about to turn when it went to hell.

Three dull thumps drew the attention of the squad as three mines launched their canister payloads into the air. Before any of the turians could focus on them, the canisters exploded, sending razor-sharp flechettes flying in every direction.

Those closest to the blast were shredded to nothing, their bodies torn to ribbons by steel barbs passing through their bodies. The kinetic barriers of those further away shimmered as they were hammered before shattering, and more flechettes impaling themselves in the armor, and straight through in the weaker portions. Those furthest were unscathed, their kinetic barriers stopping the flechettes cold and still holding under the barrage.

Before Impera, the wounded turians would have been out of fight, too wounded to focus on anything but the pain. But the Hierarchy had learned many lessons from that short war. Steroids, antibiotics and painkillers flooded the bodies of the wounded, shutting off the pain and keeping them on their feet. In total, of the squad of thirteen, only three had been killed in the blast, five wounded but only two seriously and the rest were unscathed.

The patrol were not even able to get their wits together before someone shouted, "Open fire!" Bullets came blazing from all directions, overwhelming the kinetic barriers and armor of three turians, one of whom immediately died as a bullet went through his brain. Another soldier was killed as she tried to get out of the line of fire and tripped, falling down and hitting with lethal force. Everybody who could got out of the line of fire. Hunkering down and calling for reinforcements.

But just as abruptly as it had begun the attack stopped. The rebels were not staying to fight. They had done their damage and were relocating. Happy that they had done some damage to the allies of the

Hegemony.

As for the turian patrol, a third of them were dead, and most of them were wounded (two so severely that they would die before they could receive) medical attention. The only member of the squad who had emerged from the ambush unhurt was Bala Avinash. Who stared at his dead and dying comrades in horror, wondering how everything had gone to hell so quickly.

What Bala was too inexperienced and ignorant to understand though, was that this was a normal day for the forces of the Hierarchy on Kar'Shan.

****APUFMKI****

Far from the action and secure in his bunker, High Admiral Datak Korra grimly considered the Batarian Hegemony's situation. At this point he was reviewing every single skirmish and engagement the Hegemony, including their turian allies, had with the Rebels, regardless of whether Spartans were present or not.

As High Admiral, he had seen and participated in many of the Hegemony's violent conflicts. Granted, few were proper military campaigns but he still had a wealth of knowledge to compare the reports to. And he could see the writing on the wall, the Hegemony was bleeding.

Since the attack on the Castle facility, the Rebellion had gone from being a mere nuisance, to an actual threat.

No, Datak corrected himself. It was before that, since the first time military depots were struck by the damned Rebels, ever since then the insurgents had had enough military hardware, and demonstrated enough daring and resolve, to do significant damage to the Hegemony's personnel and infrastructure.

Unfortunately such raids were starting to rapidly grow in frequency.

And most disturbingly to Datak Korra, the Spartans themselves hadn't participated in in most of these terrorist attacks. Instead the native rebels had done most of the work. The initiative and resolve of the former slaves that made up the bulk of the Rebellion seemed to grow day by day.

'It seems the humans won't or can't send enough Spartans to take on the Hegemony by themselves so instead they've tried to inspire the scum of our society to do the work for them' Datak thought. All too aware of the fact that the Spartans seemed to be succeeding at such efforts at this point.

Because while the rebels were increasingly motivated, his own personnel seemed to grow more fearful and discouraged day by day. The majority of his forces had never faced any significant rebel activity, but the constant rebel attacks and acts of vandalism against batarian police and military personnel was making them all afraid. Constantly worried about rebel snipers, ambushes, and bombs. Knowing that this was an enemy who refused to fight fairly, striking unexpected and from the shadows, and then usually running away before Hegemony forces could organize a counterattack.

He and along with the Department of Information Control did their best to reduce the impact of Rebel victories while at the same time, propagandizing their own victories. Showing how in every single direct firefight between Hegemony forces and the Rebels it always ended with a Hegemony victory. The effects of such propaganda had been marginal though. The Rebels increasing daring made any attempts to minimize their effectiveness incredibly difficult. Case in point: the latest raid on another military depot. One of medium size, it had little in the way of tanks and IFVs, but there was a good deal of heavy ordnance otherwise. Ranging from anti-armor, mortars and the like. And the Rebels had seized a massive amount of those weapons. Such an attack was incredibly difficult to cover up and so whispers still managed to seep out. There were no desertions as of yet, but now for the first time in a long time, the chance of it happening was there.

Korra still had confidence in the average batarian soldier's ability to fight, but he knew that their morale was being dangerously tested. And things were worse amongst the civilians that the Hegemony relied on to keep things running.

Because like all relatively large governments, the Batarian Hegemony needed legions of accountants, bureaucrats, and civil servants of all kinds to organize and maintain its operations. Personnel that the rebels seemed to be targeting with increasing fervor. Starting from the lowliest of managers and supervisors, their targets only started rising in importance with every successful assassination. To supervisors of munition plants and low ranking officers, to branch managers and mid-tier ranking officers and of course their latest target, one of the higher ranking Senators in the Hegemony. A few had tried to make a public appearance, several at Datak's behest, read: demand, only turn what was meant to ease the public into another Rebel victory as they were assassinated. Some with by a single bullet, while others were more...explosive.

Slowly but surely, the Hegemony was suffering a Death by a Thousand Cuts.

The unofficial leader of the Hegemony knew that ultimately it was an issue of resolve. If the forces of the Hegemony could keep their morale up they had the resources to outlast this rebellion, which, for all their ferocity, comprised only a minority of the batarian nation's population. However, while the former slaves in the Rebellion, who had virtually nothing to lose except their lives, seemed completely and utterly dedicated to bringing down the Hegemony, Korra knew that his own followers weren't nearly that committed. That all too many of them obeyed the regime out of fear, self-interest, or simply due to the weight of tradition.

Korra's eyes widened in realization. "Fear...that's the key isn't it? Fear and Resolve. An army filled with the former and without the latter; is doomed to collapse upon itself." Quoting one of the classics of ancient batarian literature, The Mastery of War. Already he could imagine this new army. An army of fearless soldiers, with an unflinching resolve, charging upon the Rebels and executing them without remorse. Shattering the Rebel's resolve while bolstering that of their allies.

The High Admiral stepped over to his desk, before pulling out a small

transmitter from it. It was a data scrambler, unless the signal, transmitter and eventual receiver was set to filter and adjust for it, any would be eavesdroppers would simple hear static. A precaution he had never taken before, but with the current 'climate' as it were, one could never be too careful.

It took less than a minute before someone responded to his message. "Oh, the great Admiral contacts us personally." The words were heavily laced were sarcasm. "To what do we owe this honor?" Datak scowled at the scientist, or rather sociopath, he had made director of Project Golgatha, the Batarian Super-Soldier program. Doctor Enid Arash. Brilliant physicist, geneticist and all around sociopath. Brutal even by the standards of the Hegemony, she was also held back by her abrasive personality and open disrespect for anyone she considered her intellectual inferior, which was virtually everyone. But Arash had always been a bit too useful to purge or completely marginalize.

Besides, circumstances had changed. Regardless of her personality flaws, the Hegemony desperately needed the services of someone like Enid Arash now. And unfortunately the unpleasant bitch was the best of the batarian regime had. She, in the opinions of many, suffered from delusions of grandeur; her life's work was focused on trying to advance the batarian genome and biology, by whatever means necessary. If Korra was honest with himself, the bitch did unnerve him somewhat, having seen some of the end results of her experiments. Not any of it pleasant. No one could deny though, with enough time and resources, she always delivered.

"I contacted you to ask if you've made any progress." He managed to say with a flat voice.

Waving her hand, which was holding a bloody surgical tool, Enid replied, "Well if by success you-" A piercing scream was heard, Enid making a sour face before shouting to someone off-screen, "I told you to get a damn muzzle on that subject! You know I can't work otherwise!" Turning back to Korra she continued, "Sorry about that, well not really. You couldn't send me better quality subjects? These barely last a single test." Tossing the bloody instrument onto a nearby tray, she added. "If you want to get results, you're going to need to give me either better subjects, or a lot more of them. Otherwise," She just shrugged. Behind her, Korra saw a gurney being moved, with two bodies stacked on top of it. By the looks in their eyes, their mouths open in silent screams, he could only assume they had died screaming. The marks on their bodies only supporting that.

'Well, she certainly doesn't waste any time.' He thought to himself. "So I assume you've made no progress then?"

"Oh I've made a great deal of progress...the cybernetics I have developed can at least double a batarian's strength and speed...the problem is finding a way to strengthen their skeleton enough so that the body doesn't snap like a twig under the strain." Arash explained as she gestured towards the ruined corpses around her. "Anything I've found just pulverizes or malforms the bone as I try to strengthen it."

"I have a new path for you to focus on." At the sour look on Enid's face he amended, "An additional path, I mean. Rather than just

enhancing their bodies, why not augment their minds as well?"

Enid frowned, "What, you mean telekinetic or telepathic abilities? Unless you're willing to wait a few centuries of forced evolution..." Datak didn't respond verbally, instead challenging her with a look that said, 'are you really as smart as you say?' To her credit, it only took another second for her to realize what was being implied. "You want me to create 'dead walkers', don't you? You want me to perfect them?"

'Dead walkers' was a batarian term referring to those that lost much of their individuality or some part of their personality by whatever cause. Sometimes it was combat, others was harsh punishment, whatever the cause, the end result was an individual that for the most part, followed whatever orders given to them. Ancient batarians had assumed that Dead walkers truly were dead (thus the name) due to their souls being stolen by demons. Of course modern batarians (at least intelligent and well educated ones) knew better. But the stigma remained, and those who lost their minds and sense of self-preservation were regarded as creepy and disturbing at best (and soulless monsters at worst).

"Essentially, yes. If you can create a means of, on a large scale, utterly erasing all traces of fear and doubt within individuals, while breaking them and making them malleable, the end result is an army without fear, hesitation and unflinching loyalty." Despite their general value as a military asset, Dead Walkers were far and few in between, with the vast majority being in some way, worthless as an asset.

"Yes, I can see your point." Enid admitted, "But it won't be easy. Aside from more subjects, I'm going to need-"

"Just forward the lists to me and I'll ensure you get them." Datak interrupted.

>"All of them. Including your subjects; just add what types of subject you want."<p>

Enid just nodded before killing the link without so much as a farewell. Datak Korra grunted irritably in response. He would tolerate that kind of disrespect from virtually nobody under his command. But you had to make allowances for genius, even (or perhaps especially) the crazy ones.

****APUFMKII****

For once, Parangosky and her people were not being forced to meet aboard the Odin's Eye. A welcome fact as despite it was one of the most secure places to meet in UNSC space, scheduling such meetings was a logistics nightmare as the ship, the meeting and the disappearances of those attending had to be covered up. Now they could meet more openly, relatively speaking. This time, the meeting was under ONI's Sword Base on Reach.

Things were looking up for the Office of Naval Intelligence. While the New Covenant had wiped out most of ONI's assets in their territory, and the covert ops group had been forced to give up virtually all that remained in NC territory to keep the peace with Lord Hood, the New Covenant seemed unwilling or unable to retaliate further. Moreover, as time went on ONI data on and infiltration of

Council space continued. Especially in the Batarian Hegemony.

Operation Spartacus was proceeding well. The ranks of the Rebellion were slowly but steadily increasing as the Rebellion proved it had the resolve and staying power to continue defying the Hegemony. Giving ONI access (through the Rebellion) to an ever expanding amount of people, territory, and information in the batarian nation. The slavers that they had turned only adding to the assets that ONI was receiving. Being far more effective and profitable than any of them had expected. Serving as couriers of information from the Hegemony along with other assets, and of course, constantly supplying their agents on the ground. In terms of intel, ONI was gorging itself on information. The only wrinkle was the strong and slowly increasing support the regime was receiving from the Turian Hierarchy.

"So," Ned Rich started, "we've been hamstrung by Hood, the bird-brains are getting involved, along with the walking tortoises, squid-heads, and frogs. And Section 0 is now Hood's private army."

"So far the asari, krogan, and salarians have given the Hegemony only token support and I doubt that will change unless we provoke them directly." Halabi shot back. Since all operations against the New Covenant were more or less now defunct, Halabi had been given command of operations in Citadel Space. "And despite all that we've done, having the local populace providing the bulk of the action means that they have no reason to change."

"That still leaves the turians and they hate us." Gibson pointed out. "I hate to say it, but I have to give those fringe-heads some credit. They haven't been sitting on their asses and twiddling their thumbs since Impera. They've been working on quite a few new toys."

"The more I learn about the Council Races, the more I think destroying Impera was a mistake...it seems like its done more to motivate the bird-brains than terrify them." Dalia Artmova muttered. The now ONI Rear-Admiral had been the one to make the unauthorized decision to drop and then detonate a NOVA-grade nuclear weapon on Impera. When Denton had promised that she and those who went along with her plan were to be handed over to face trial for her action, ONI knew they couldn't just let someone willing to go to such lengths out of their reach. A simple surgical alteration to a life-sentence inmate, plus promises of payments to her family and those of the crew if they went along, and just like that, Dalia was free woman.

"There's no point in worrying over what could have been, Dalia." Parangosky remarked. "I didn't go to such lengths to keep you out of alien hands, just so you can question your actions."

"Besides long term the turians won't matter...there are far more important things in Council Space" the head of ONI continued. Referring to her long term goals for the region.

There was an awkward silence at that. Most of the people in the room had at least some idea of what Parangosky was talking about, and even by ONI regular standards it was extremely ambitious and amoral. The kind of thing that could bring the Office of Naval Intelligence (and perhaps humanity itself) down if things went wrong. But no one in the

room had the courage to express doubt to the terrible old woman, so Rich changed the topic by saying "Yes, but...in the immediate sense the turians ARE a real problem."

"No, they are not." Osmin countered. "They may have accelerated their weapons development, but they are still a far cry from ever being a threat to us. Even should they develop effective slipspace drives, our forces are still superior and growing every month." All those present felt somewhat unnerved when the ONI Director's prodigy smiled; it was never a good sign for any involved. "The Forerunner archives have been disclosing more information as of late, with any luck they may have information regarding the Citadel races, or at least more useful information."

"Actually their involvement is a good thing." Everyone's attention turned to the individual, "The turians are beginning to suffer significant losses supporting the Hegemony while we spend less than a tenth what they do on Operation Spartacus. When this war is over the Hierarchy will be exhausted, demoralized, and much less popular with its own people and neighbors, while at the most we will have lost a few dozen Spartans and a hundred or so other operatives." Gibson stated confidently.

"At this point, we are winning or at least holding our own on all fronts." Osmin agreed.

"But that could easily change if we push our luck. The Covenant, Citadel Council, and even Lord Hood are all watching us like hawks down just waiting for us to slip up or overreach" Dalia Artmova argued, having gotten far more cautious and conservative since being promoted.

The head of ONI looked at her Dalia in annoyance. She had protected and promoted Dalia for her ruthless drive, but in the wake of Impera's destruction (which Dalia now regretted) Artmova had developed into a useful but not particularly extraordinary administrator. Moreover, none of her other chief subordinates favored escalating their operations against the Hegemony (or other Citadel Races) at this point either.

Worst of all, the admiral had to admit (if only to herself) that they had a point. While her instinct was always to go for the enemy's jugular, what ONI was currently doing seemed to be working. While escalating their operations was all too likely to provoke a strong response from their enemies and rivals.

"While we do run the risk of raising the ire of the Citadel Council," Parangosky admitted, "there is very little they can do regarding our Operations in Khar'Shan, and the evolution of the Rebellion into the entire Hegemony without risking the ire of their own citizens. Thanks to reports provided by Halabi, we know that the Citadel citizens have as much distaste for the Hegemony as we do, and should the Council ever decide to expand upon their operations to end the Rebellion, their citizens may oust them from office." She pointed out, with the officer in question nodded in affirmation.

While they may not have been able to actively work in Citadel space, that did not prevent them learning as much as they could, thanks to their AIs and the Citadel's own extranet. In comparison to human and even Covenant cyberwarfare suites and defenses, that used by the

Citadel were nowhere near capable of preventing ONI's access, with the exception of the more highly-encrypted files. If only because any sort of access or proximity would immediately raise alarms, or so was assumed.

"That being said however, I still believe that we may need to increase our efforts for the Operation. Several of the Spartans sent to assist have been sent back to Reach for medical attention and recovery. Along with the revelation of Spartans actually being able to die, thanks to that damn batarian high admiral." Thankfully, despite it being a public broadcast, ONI Section II was on top of it, as always. Quickly broadcasting their own counter-message with UEG/UNSC space that the entire video was a fabrication. While humans were indeed present in the Hegemony, no Spartans were reported missing or AWOL. Therefore, any supposed-Spartans were either imposters or digitally added.

Of course it was all lies, and at this point ONI had very little credibility left with the public. But the Hegemony's reputation was even worse. Moreover, the xenophobia left over from the Great War caused many humans to mistrust anything aliens said as a matter of course. So whether High Admiral Korra's public broadcast had hurt ONI PR wise with the average human was debatable.

"With all due respect, ma'am that's a bad idea. Lord Hood is still waiting for us to step out of the line and all indications are that the New Covenant is finally getting its confidence back. This this the time to consolidate what we already have, NOT reach out for more." Admiral Artmova said firmly. "There's also the fact that we may not NEED to further our involvement beyond what we have already planned. The Rebellion has now started growing in power that it is now, if somewhat, able to maintain itself without our aid. Soon enough, our involvement may be a moot point."

'Of course for all her strategic caution, Dalia's still one of the few people in ONI willing to stand up to me." Parangosky thought as she looked at the officially dead woman. Giving the Dalia her best glare, before sharing it with the others, asked, "Do any of you agree with her?"

Slowly and reluctantly (in a few cases with apologetic looks on their faces) the rest of the men and women in the room nodded. None of them were happy to be openly disagreeing with the terrible old woman. But they all felt that ONI was (metaphorically speaking) pushing its luck. Noticing how their enemies and rivals were becoming angrier, better prepared, and more paranoid in response to ONI's continuing aggression.

To the surprise of all, the old Admiral actually smiled. Just barely, but it was an honest smile. "Good, I was expecting for all of you to say as much. If any of had simply agreed with me, you would have been ordered to leave. I have no need of any sycophants or mindless drones amongst you. However, while we may NOT be escalating our operation, we will be maintaining them."

So the course was set. Nobody in the room was quite sure if they had actually changed Admiral Parangosky's mind or if she had just been testing them. Regardless, Operation Spartacus would continue. As ONI tried to carve out a sphere of influence directly in Citadel space.

****APUFMKII****

"The Resolute just called to change its ETA to tomorrow afternoon." Councilor Tevos's personal assistant informed the asari.

"Thank you Electra" Tevos told her assistant. Hoping that none of her inner turmoil showed on her face.

The Resolute was the personal ship of Justicar Taiba. Matriarch Abene's most trusted student and the one that she was sending to the Citadel. To 'facilitate' communications between the Justicar Order and the Citadel Council (or at least the asari component of it).

But Tevos had been a politician long enough to read between the lines. She knew that the leader of the Justicars was sending Taiba to not just keep an eye on her, but to send a message as well; 'The Justicars were returning'. It was a powerful one as most law-abiding asari would submit to the authority of a Justicar before anyone else, even before Tevos. Who for once in her long life was wishing there was more bureaucratic paperwork. She had been throwing as many regulations and forms to be filled out as she could at the Justicars, and using as many loopholes to delay their arrival. Apparently though, it had done very little in comparison.

The problem was, the Justicars were (in a very real sense) above the law in the Asari Republics. Giving them the right to obey or ignore laws at their whim. Councilor Tevos hadn't really considered it a problem when the Justicars had been isolated from the rest of society (in truth, she hadn't thought much about the Justicars at all until she needed them) but now she was seeing the awful implications of what her ancestors had done.

If Matriarch Abene had been telling the truth, and Tevos wasn't sure what to believe, all the power the Asari Republics possessed was nothing more than a facade. An allowance granted only by the Justicars that could be taken away just as easily, allowing them to take control at their whim. And worst of all, there was nothing she could do to stop them. If the Justicars wanted to resume power, and begin remaking the Asari Republics into a more militant state and hardening its people; under the claim that the Asari needed to reclaim their lost glory as a galactic superpower on their own, or any number of reasons, the people would not only agree, but support it with all their might.

'Of course there will be dissenters, but virtually everybody has violated the Justicar's precious and ridiculously long Code in some way, giving them an excuse to kill virtually any of their critics." Tevos thought pessimistically.

As she watched the seconds tick by on the clock, Tevos racked her mind for an idea, any idea, that might help with the Justicars. But every asset she could think of was either loyal to the Republics and thus submitted to the Justicars, such as the Asari Commandos, or be totally ineffective, such as mercenaries. As she kept striking every idea her mind could come up with, a sense of dread and defeat kept rising within her.

What if she couldn't find a solution? Something that would allow her to remove the Justicars from the equation, but it would allow her to

keep her reputation intact. But what? It was as though there was a solution that was both legal yet highly illegal otherwiseâ€¦|

Tevos paused as she ran over the idea several times in her head. Considering as many permutations and potential outcomes as possible. 'Perhaps...it is indeed possible'. She thought with each permutation, and each outcome proving to be potentially more favorable than the last. 'Though, this will only end in one of two ways.' She realized. The final permutation finished running through her mind, she pulled up her Omnitool before typing a quick message and sending it off.

Shutting her tool down, she contacted her secretary. "Nyxeris, I want you to postpone all scheduled meetings for today."

"All, madam Councilor?" The asari asked over the comm.

"Yes, Nyxeris, all." Tevos confirmed. "I also want you to keep all visitors away for the remainder of the day. Unless they are one of the other Councilors do not let them in."

"Yes, Councilor." Nyxeris confirmed, already she knew what Tevos considered to 'important' when it came to this. "Is there anything else?"

"There should be a Spectre coming to see me soon. When she arrives just send her up to see me, and since the meeting itself is classified erase all records of it as soon as she leaves."

A short while later the asari Spectre Tela Vasir was summoned to the Councilor's office. Fortunately the Spectre was already on the Citadel so didn't take her long to get to her boss's office. Telling the secretary "Councilor Tevos sent for me."

Nyxeris simply opened the doors to allow the Spectre in. Shutting them behind Tela once she was inside. Curious as to what the Councilor and Spectre were doing, but not foolish (or unprofessional) enough to try eavesdropping.

Tela Vasir found the Councilor sitting at her desk looking worried. Tevos was so preoccupied it took her a moment to notice the Spectre's presence. Politely greeting Vasir once she did.

"Thank you for coming so promptly Vasir I am glad to see that you seem to have fully recovered from your injuries."

"It was only a flesh wound so inbred pirates didn't have decent weapons anyway" the Spectre replied with a shrug. Referring to her last mission for the Council of eliminating a band of murderous pirates that were preying on ships traveling along a key trade route in the Terminus Systems.

"Nevertheless, the way that you dealt with them was very impressive." Tevos said with a charming smile she had spent centuries working on.

The Councilor continued to engage in polite small talk for some time. Asking Tela about her interests, romantic life, and other things personal trivia. After a while the Spectre got annoyed. Wondering when her superior would get to the point.

'Either Tevos is trying to flirt with me_and I'm pretty sure that she's better at it than this_-or she wants to discuss something with me so awful and disturbing that even she doesn't know how to talk about it' Tela thought as the babble from her boss continued.

"Madam Councilor, I know that you wouldn't waste a Spectre's time just to gossip, so with all due respect, could you please tell me why you summoned me?" Tela bluntly asked, though she was being far more polite than she would be with virtually anyone else under similar circumstances.

"It is a rather...complicated issue" Tevos answered ominously.

"Complicated as in 'STG' backroom deals or 'Aria T'Loak' flexing her muscles again?"

"Justicars" Tevos replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Tela didn't answer for a moment, just staring at the Councilor before she finally said, "Justicars...Goddess be damned Justicarsâ€|" She muttered. "Well considering you aren't dead, just what did you do?"

"I asked them for help and they said...they saidâ€|" Tevos words simply trailed off.

"What? Just what exactly did the sanctimonious whores just tell you?" Tela pressed.

The asari Spectre held a grudge against the Order. As a young maiden (her head filled with dreams of adventure and glory) Tela had tried to join the legendary Justicars. But they wouldn't even let her undergo the Trials that all potential Justicars had to (in order to prove their dedication and worth). Dismissing Vasir's motives as petty and her dreams as childish, the Justicar Tela had talked to had even suggested that the (at the time) young and naive Vasir was too weak and foolish to ever be a warrior of any kind.

Tela Vasir had never forgotten nor forgiven the insult.

"It would be easier just to show you" the Councilor replied. Hesitant (even in her own office, alone with the Spectre she intended to confide in) to speak the words aloud. Hoping that once Tela saw that memory she would tell her boss that it wasn't as bad as Tevos thought. Reaching out to the Spectre as Tela allowed their minds to merge, showing Vasir the thing that had increasingly consumed her thoughts for months.

'So...the decrepit hags think that they actually can take what doesn't belong to them, do they?' Tela thought to herself as the Meld deepened. 'This is what has you afraid then?' if the Spectre was honest with herself, were it anyone else, she probably would have assisted them in changing the asari. The asari had grown soft, in her opinion. Weak, relying on the turians and krogan to do all the fighting while they negotiated the treaties. If Tela had her way, the asari would never have grown so weak. But if it was the Justicars who wanted that change, she would first see the asari burn, or preferably, the entire holier-than-thou Justicar Order.

As the Meld continued one thing that really struck Tela was how much older Tevos was than her. Despite her still youthful appearance Tevos was nearing the end of her natural life span (she would probably be dead of old age in less a century, and lose her looks and health long before that). Tevos was set in her ways and the kind of radical change that the other Council Races wanted (and the Justicars too for that matter) frightened her. At the deepest and most primitive level, the old Councilor still wanted to pretend that everything was alright.

So even though it went against the grain, as the Meld ended Tela hugged Tevos whispering. "Shh...everything will be alright." At the comforting words Tevos wept onto the younger asari's shoulder. Releasing the tension that had been building up for half a year as Tela continued to murmur words of reassurance. Oblivious to the fact that Vasir actually looked down on her for her show of weakness.

"But...but what can we do?" Tevos said pitifully. As she thought 'they are our greatest warriors and were bound by no asari law. Why did our foremothers let this happen?!"

Tela was silent as she considered the question. Just what could she do? What could be done? Politically, the Justicars were untouchable. And there was no legal recourse to be taken against them. It wasn't like they could just wipe them all out? Could they?

Unknown to the Asari Councilor, Tela was also a Shadow Broker Operative, having traded favors for favors with the galaxy's best (and most infamous) information broker. And Tevos had access to resources most could only ever dream of. 'Yes,' she thought, 'maybe we couldâ€|'

Placing a palm against Tevos face and turning so they were looking eye to eye, the Spectre answered, "Simple. We can eradicate them."

"But they're our greatest warriors and everybody loves them." Tevos replied, not so much in denial as disbelief.

"Not quite everybody, Tevos...Not quite." Tela whispered softly. "There are many who would kill for a chance to end the Justicars, and I know all of them."

A hand slinked down the Councilor's body. "All we need is time," the hand moved down her chest, giving the Councilor's breast a feather light caress "and patience..." She stopped just above Tevo's navel before pulling away. Staring into the matriarch's surprised eyes with an arrogant smirk. A pleasant tingle going through her body as she took control.

Then she embraced Tevos and pulled her boss into a kiss. For the briefest moment it seemed as though Tevos would resist. But the Councilor was lonely, scared, and Tela seemed like she was the only one on her side at this point. So she gave in, and then Vasir realized that she she could convince her supposed superior to do anything.

****APUFMKII****

Back in the Hegemony, on Khar'Shan, Jella Korrigan was having a quiet moment to herself, a rare commodity for her as of late. Even her lover was asleep in the small cot that they shared. Since the fact that Council Special Forces were hunting for the Rebels, she and the others were always constantly on the move. Going from one safe house to the next to avoid discovery.

Most would have taken this time to get some sleep and rest. But as the leader of the Rebellion, along with the lessons that John had ingrained into her, she felt it was her responsibility to keep up to date with the Rebellion and any information that could relate to and possibly aid the effort.

Currently, she was going over the assets available to the Rebellion; both what they had 'liberated' from the Hegemony and what they had been given by the UNSC. They weren't going to running low on most anything any time soon, that was for sure. Even if they did not have the resources given to them by the UNSC, that which they took from the Hegemony would have held them over.

Setting the documents aside, she picked up another tablet and began reading. It was a general report on the ambushes being conducted against the Hegemony. But the words began to blur and their meaning faded as she lost focus, until finally she just let the thing fall from her fingers. 'I thought I knew who the monsters were...how did that change so quickly?'

The rebels had recently began to conduct raids (including storming apartments and killing all the slave owners) in the relatively upscale district of Overseer City known as Pardek. But there was something strange about the people there.

One of the many religions banned by the Hegemony had apparently spread widely throughout the neighborhood. This faith taught that all sentients (including slaves) had souls and were (in a spiritual sense) brothers and sisters. Instructing its followers to treat everyone (especially those under their power) with generosity and compassion. According to rumors, these particular slaveowners in the area treated their slaves practically like family, and many of their slaves obeyed out of genuine loyalty (instead of the more common fear and apathy that motivated most slaves).

Jella had thought these rumors to be just that, rumors. Maybe something that was spread in the hopes that the Rebels wouldn't come anywhere near their district or homes. Jella had personally lead the raid against Pardek District. What they had expected at most was a small security force of perhaps a dozen batarians at most, maybe some security mechs.

But to the shock and confusion of the rebels, when they had invaded the neighborhood the slaves themselves had fought in defense of their masters. Especially the children under their care, doing their best to keep the little ones safe. The Rebels had been forced to kill nearly every slave that they had come to liberate. Even the ones they had managed to disarm and subdue didn't give up fighting. Doing everything they could to stop the Rebels. Not that it had made much difference.

Thinking the Masters and Mistresses had somehow broken and

indoctrinated the slaves, many of the Rebels showed no quarter. The old were killed in their beds, the men tortured and killed, the women used then murdered. And the children were not spared. The abuse many of them had suffered over their lives, the suffering that had been ongoing for centuries and generations, driving their hate and anger. In truth, Jella had lost control of her people for a while, as outrage over being forced to fight their fellow slaves pushed them over the edge.

Jella was incredibly glad that she had not sent Cara T'Val on the Pardek raid. She was sure her asari lover would have been shocked and horrified by the actions of her fellow rebels. And might even have tried to stop them (and would have all too likely gotten injured or even killed as a result).

For Jella herself though, what got to her wasn't the slaughter, and it was, it couldn't be called anything else. The deaths of many of the children and teenagers was appalling yes, but she seen and endured far worse. No, what got to her personally was their interrogation of the three slaves they had managed to take alive out of what should have been dozens.

By the Gods, even the good news that she had gotten couldn't distract her from that raid! The Rebellion wasn't just isolated to Khar'Shan anymore, it was spreading throughout the Hegemony, independent uprisings across a number of worlds, from the Core to the Outer colonies. John had even told her about replacement Spartans were to arrive soon to replace the ones who had been injured and sent home. And by his words, some would be just like him in terms of skill and ability. But the interrogations, the Pardek Raid just kept coming to the forefront of her mind. She still couldn't shake what those three prisoners had told her.

They had said the rumors about Pardek District had been true. Every single damn one of them to the last. The slaves HAD been well treated, and genuinely loved their masters, the sort of thing the Hegemony always claimed was the norm throughout their territory but that the experiences of most slaves bitterly contradicted.

The slaves in the Pardek District had not seen the rebels as liberators. Merely as monstrous murderers. The survivors she had spoken to had promised vengeance for their murdered families. By the vitriol in their words and their fanatic defense, she knew that those slaves would never turn. As a result, their captors felt they had no choice but to kill them.

After she had killed the prisoners personally (because now that things had calmed, her followers' bloodlust seemed to have universally transformed into shame) Jella had heard quiet sobbing as she was leaving the apartment building. Leading her to a little girl's bedroom, filled with toys, gadgets, and everything a spoiled child could reasonably expect from middle class batarian parents. The mother was dead on the bedroom floor, her face frozen forever in an expression of surprise. The noise was coming from under the large (and thanks to the mother's many bullet wounds) bloody bed.

Drawing her pistol, she peeked under the bed to see a surprising sight. Survivors, two of them. Young girls, one a batarian, the other asari. She had tried to coax them out but they refused to. At that moment, she would have loved nothing more than to have been gentle

and had them come to her, but time had not been on her side.

Before anything, she had taken down a curtain and tossed it over the mother's body and then called for another Rebel, making sure it an asari that came before crouching again. Reaching under the bed, she grabbed one of them before pulling them out. Taking care not to injury either of them as she did so. She handed the first one, the asari to her subordinate before taking the batarian girl in her arms. The two of them struggling the entire time but eventually, exhaustion, both physical and mental, claimed them and they fell asleep.

Now, they were both in her quarters at the hideout. The two girls cuddling with each other and Cara hugging both of them. They looked surprising cute, and for a moment Jella imagined that they really were her and Cara's kids (perhaps adopted or even the children that they had each given birth to, she thought the asari looked a lot like Cara, but Jella hadn't actually seen that many different asari so she might have just been imagining it).

Then the batarian girl opened her eyes, her four eyes seemingly dead as they stared at Jella. Reminding Korragan that she had killed the girl's mother. That she would probably always see Jella as a monster, and if she was anything like the rebel leader, she might seek vengeance one day.

She had stared down Spartans, but Jella couldn't meet that accusing gaze. So she grabbed a bottle of wine that they had taken from one of the homes they had raided that night and began to drink. But she couldn't quiet her thoughts, and despite drinking enough to kill a lesser woman, Jella got no sleep that night.

****APUFMKII****

"He who fights monsters should see to it that he himself does not become a monster. For if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

â€" ****Friedrich Nietzsche****

"There is a difference between you and me. We both looked into the abyss, but when it looked back at us, you blinked."

__ ****Batman ****__

26. Shadow War: The Best of Intentions

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk. II

Chapter 26

"I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." -Albert Einstein

Shadow War: The Best of Intentions...

Since their kidnapping at the hands of the humans during the first disastrous meeting between the UNSC and the Citadel Council, the

Council had rarely left the safety of the Citadel. Rather than being a show of cowardice, it was largely taken as a show of solidarity by the citizens. Presenting a strong public image during these times of fear.

Still, they did leave the Citadel when the situation had called for it. And the presentation that they were recently invited to, certainly warranted it.

A small fleet of ships, mainly turian vessels, were scattered throughout one of the most desolate systems in the Hierarchy's territory. Small by today's standard that is. A decade ago the number of ships present would have been considered an invasion fleet by the Citadel powers, now it was just a larger than average task force (albeit one centered around a turian dreadnought).

The entire Piett System was uninhabitable and lifeless, no colonization values whatsoever. The only decent sized planet orbiting the Piett star was barren, lifeless, and the turians had stripped it of all natural resources centuries ago.

In fact the only thing that stood out about the world of Firmus was its size and density. Which were virtually the same as Impera's before the fortress planet was destroyed. Which made it ideal for the demonstration that was about to occur.

The Councilors were on the bridge of the turian dreadnought _Implacable Justice_, which was part of a new class of dreadnoughts built after the end of the brief war with the UNSC. The _Implacable Justice_ and her sister ships were the first of the Emperor-Class dreadnoughts, the Hierarchy's newest ship-of-the-line. At a length of almost two kilometers, three spinal guns and enough munitions to turn a moon into cinders. In addition to new Cyclonic Barrier Technology, courtesy of the Asari Republics on top of their own multi-layer barriers, the Emperor-Class was incredibly hard to kill. The entire design had been created with the goal in mind of giving the turians a fighting chance in space combat if they had to fight humanity again (something many turians thought was inevitable). But the _Implacable Justice_ and the dreadnoughts like her were insignificant compared to what the Council had come to the Piett System to see.

As the Councilors watched from the bridge, what appeared to be a large shuttle was launched from the lead dreadnought. Moving relatively slowly towards the planet Firmus. Sensors aboard the _Implacable Justice_ gave everyone on board and those connected a crystal-clear view of the object as it fell towards its target.

The wait was almost agonizingly slow. "Soâ€¦" Wrex started, "you really think that this new toy of yours is going to actually be effective?" When he and the other Councilors had received the missive, he had his doubts about what the message claimed.

"Indeed, we are." Cicero replied, no one missing his use of the word, 'we'. It was becoming apparent, if it wasn't already, that for the length of this presentation, Cicero was there as part of the Turian Hierarchy, not the Citadel Council. "Today will be a Red Letter Day for not just the Hierarchy, but all of Citadel space. After today, while the people may not know it, the human's have lost one of their monopolies." As though on cue, the package impacted the lifeless world just as Cicero finished speaking.

And again, the galaxy shuddered. A massive nuclear explosion cracked Firmus' surface, great fissures visible from space breaking continents as the mushroom cloud reached towards the heavens. Shockwaves shattered mountains and raised towering tsunamis of rubble that destroyed whatever the shockwaves left behind.

In less than a minute, Firmus was just a cracked and ruined world. Magma flowed out from the fissures, everything was buried under rock or rubble but the spectacle of death was not quite over. The pressures upon the planet was becoming too much, the mushroom cloud had yet to fade, only growing stronger and larger. Gouts of flame pierced out from the atmosphere.

Finally the planet had enough, atmosphere, rubble and water was ejected into space as the planet came apart in great chunks. Magma super-cooled in the Void of space. Several warships were forced to enter FTL to avoid

All told, it took mere minutes for Planet Firmus to be reduced to mere free floating chunks the size of continents. An entire world reduced to rubble by just one bomb. Just like what had happened to Impera.

While the spectacle was doubtlessly impressive, for the the krogan Councilor it was a...disappointment. The human's planet-killer had reduced Impera to little more than an asteroid field, while this bomb had just pieces behind the size of small moons. Showing that even after all the work the turians had put into the project, they were still trailing behind humanity.

Councilor Tevos had a very different reaction to the sight though. Knowing that that it heralded the beginning of an arms race greater than any her people had ever seen. No, it had since begun after Impera, today was just an example of what would come from it. And that the next great war, the destruction of garden worlds might be the norm, rather than the exception. Perhaps worst of all, her own people would need such weapons just as a deterrent (if nothing else).

The salarian Councilor showed no visible reaction at all. The STG had informed him of what the turians were working on long before this. But no salarian had been quite sure the turians could do it. Now they had, and all the Citadel Races would have to live with the consequences.

But Councilor Cicero was simply furious. While the device had indeed destroyed Firmus as advertised, it was supposed to be as destructive as the human planet-killer. It obviously wasn't, embarrassing him in front of his colleagues. As well as illustrating how the Hierarchy had yet to equal the destructive power of humanity.

Cicero turned and glared at Doctor Mothra, the Director of Project Endymion, and the turian male who had promised him that results of the A.P.A.W. (anti-planetary artillery weapon) bomb would be just as impressive as the humans NOVA bomb. Instead it had failed to live up to the hype.

Mothra was feeling quite nervous, and was not hiding it well at all. A talon kept scratching at his arm, creating a tear in his coat. It

had taken him and his team a full year to (roughly) understand just exactly how the human's NOVA bomb had operated to give it such destructive potential.

The best theory had been containing a single massive, or simultaneous nuclear explosions, and containing that detonation for as long as possible to boost the thermonuclear yield. A theory that, despite seeming somewhat hairbrained, was the most plausible. From there it had been trying to actually develop a bomb that used this technique.

Obtaining the nuclear warheads had been easy enough. The Hierarchy alone had produced enough warheads to fill every turian home in their home system. No, the problem had been trying to find a material that could contain and boost the yield.

Every material he found could not contain the fission reaction long enough for there to be any benefit. At least until he had opted to try the expensive alloy known as closest turian approximation to the alloy used in Mass Relays and the Citadel. It was still a far cry from what the Protheans had apparently been capable of producing on a mass scale, but it was the strongest material available, if extremely costly due to its production methods. Which was why it was reserved for the manufacture of military drive cores, specifically dreadnoughts.

And it had worked. Sort of. The amount of the prohibitively expensive alloy to make the prototype A.P.A.W. bomb used made up roughly seventy-percent of the actual bomb. The remaining thirty-percent was the dozen or so nuclear warheads that were actually used. Raising the price of the bomb to the point that it would have been cheaper to build a dozen dreadnoughts.

Only to see it fail to deliver on his promise to match the humans firepower.

"I admit the prototype wasn't quite as destructive as projected sir but it did STILL destroy Firmus. We now have a proven design for a weapon that can destroy enemy worlds" Director Mothra said in response to Councilor Cicero's glare.

"Yes. But we are still evidently lagging behind the human" Cicero ground out.

"Keep in mind, this was only the prototype." Mothra tried to argue. "A non-production model. With the next generation we'll be able to produce them on a somewhat large scale, and make them more effective."

"They better, or you may found yourself eking out a living in the Terminus." Cicero threatened before approaching his fellow Councilors. "Well, impressive isn't it?"

"Indeed...the Hierarchy can now match the UNSC when it comes to destructive potential." Tevos said with an insincere smile. Knowing that if the turians and asari ever became enemies, they were all too likely to use such weapons against the worlds of the Asari Republics.

"Oh, this will not just be only available to the Hierarchy. In times

such as these, we must all stand together. To foster such relations, the Hierarchy will be sharing both plans and methods of manufacture with the Asari Republics, Krogan Empire, and Salarian Union."

The other three Councilors looked at Cicero in surprise. Even allies generally didn't share such valuable technology for free. Especially when it involved issues of national security. There had to be some sort of catch.

"Of course there are a few conditions."

"HA. I knew it. Okay Cicero, just does just the Hierarchy want?" Wrex replied with a smirk.

"Aside from not using against it the Hierarchy?" Cicero asked. "Total commitment to suppressing the Rebellion in the Hegemony. Along with a cooperative effort between all four of our governments to develop the next generation of these bombs and any potential variations."

None of the other Councilors were enthusiastic about supporting the Batarian Hegemony in what was increasingly looking like a bloody civil war. But none of them were willing to accept the other Council Races having the technology while they were denied it. So Wrex replied "all right Cicero I'll send a krogan fleet to support the Hegemony within a week."

"The Union lacks the vast fleets and large armies your people and the krogan have, but I will ensure that the STG makes ending the batarian rebellion their top priority." Vald'n said as he looked at Cicero.

Tevos didn't say anything. Instead she simply used her omnitool to send a large file to Cicero's. Smiling as the turian read it. Saying, "I trust this will be sufficient." Cicero considered the technologies and vast funds the asari was promising to share and simply nodded (while he would have preferred more of a military commitment, the truth was that Project Endymion needed the financial support of the wealthy Asari Republics to reach its full potential).

Vad'n spoke up, drawing the attention of his colleagues, "If we are to be sharing the responsibilities of our secret projects." Before he had their curiosity, now he had their attention. The STG were notorious about their secret projects. So all the other Councilors were eager to hear what he had to say.

"There is another Project the STG has been conducting for a short time now. One that I think all of you will be interested in. We call it: Project Bruticus."

****APUFMKII****

To the ignorance of the Council and all their escorts, the demonstration had borne silent witnesses. Far from any turian ship, the first in a line of quarian-Covenant engineered warships bore witness to the fruits of the turian war machine.

The stealth ship was the first in its class and type within the New Covenant. Taking the revolutionary ship designs the quarians had spent years developing, brought to life (as well as being enhanced

and altered) through the use of superior Covenant technology. Creating ships with no heat signatures, radiation, or other detectable emissions. Invisible to everything but the naked eye.

But for the leaders of the New Covenant, this was not quite good enough. So the sangheili engineers involved had added their active camouflage technology to the stealth craft. Creating spaceships that were undetectable via virtually any means known to the Council Races, UNSC, or the New Covenant itself.

Today had been the test of the prototype, to see just how well it would truly function against the Citadel Council. They had tracked and followed the Implacable Justice to this barren system. Both to simply observe the Hierarchy's newest and most powerful type of warship in action, and to see how well the stealth held up against the Hierarchy's latest technology.

It had meant to be a simple test, to see how long they could last before they risked detection. No one, not even the shipmaster had expected to bear witness to what they had just had.

Subtle glances were shared between the crew until finally they all look to their shipmaster. With the barest of hesitation, he nodded. A sign of relief was shared as the helmsman made their preparations. This was no longer a simple test, now they were the sole bearers of a critical piece of intelligence. The decision was made: they would make all haste to High Charity and report in. What their superiors did with that information was beyond their pay grade.

Silent and unseen, the prototype craft traveled to the dark side of what had been Firmus' moon before a slipspace rupture tore its way into existence and they slipped through, the portal closing behind them.

The Citadel Council and its escorts ignorant that their trump card had already been revealed.

****APUFMKII****

Although things had gotten very ugly on Jarum in the immediate aftermath of the escape of Thomas Bluestone, in the half a year since then, things had more or less returned to normal. This partially due simply to the passage of time, but it was also due to the humans investing a lot more money into the colony, and Consul Alexander Xanatos' efforts to reach out to the community. Then less than a month ago, a new construction project had unearthed a human corpse. A forensic examination revealed that it was the remains of Bluestone, thus making it obvious to all but the most bitterly prejudiced against humanity that (regardless of who or what was behind the man's escape) the UNSC government had not helped the rapist escape justice. Which did even more to quiet anti-human voices in the colony.

Still, the UNSC did not forget how closely the embassy had come to simply being ransacked and burned to the ground by a raging mob. The compound was now patrolled by the towering HRUNTING/YGGDRASIL Mk. IX Armor Defense System, more commonly know as the Mantis. At almost six meters, it was easily seen over the walls of the compound. The sight of the machines causing everyone give the place a wide berth. Still those machines and the occasional storefront with signs that said, "No humans allowed", it was almost as those the Bluestone Incident

had never happened.

The most visible sign of how comfortable the people of Jarum had become with humanity was all the asari/human couples who openly showed affection for each other in public. Something that would have been unimaginable a few years ago (or on the Citadel in the present day). Of all these couples, the ones who were the most publicly proud of their relationship were Michael Smith and Rayna Cardiga. The asari and human male had quite a lot in common. They were both doctors, they both had a daughter from a previous relationship, and they both believed in dedicating their lives to helping the less fortunate.

They ran the Community Health Clinic in the rundown Jubilation Street neighborhood. Which was funded via a grant from the city government (and since the Bluestone Incident, the UEG consulate) to serve the health needs of low income people (that frankly couldn't afford to see regular doctors). The only two full time employees were Smith and Cardiga themselves, everybody else who worked there was a volunteer or worked part time.

Smith and Cardiga were an odd couple in many ways. Unlike the stereotypically beautiful and slender asari that seemed to be the only kind that ever appeared in the media, Matron Cardiga was pleasantly plump (having never lost most of the extra weight that she gained during her only pregnancy fifty years ago) and was annoyed by the fact that all too many people asked, upon first meeting her, when the baby was due.

Michael Smith was fairly short for a man (his head only coming up to Rayna's shoulders, so if he wasn't careful his eyes were constantly on breast level with her and most other women) and very skinny. Unlike Cardiga (who ate for comfort) Michael lost his appetite when he got angry or stressed. But much like Rayna, he was too busy most of the time taking care of other people (such as his daughter or patients) to take care of himself (and make sure that he did things like exercise and eat properly).

Between their children and patients, the couple were left with very little free time. And what free time they had was increasingly becoming consumed by one project. Something that had started as a joke, turned into a kind of hobby, and was becoming a serious concern of theirs as time went on.

"Are you sure about this Mike?" Rayna asked anxiously as she paced the little office they both shared at the clinic. Eating a candy bar without really thinking about it as she walked back and forth (Cardiga had quickly fallen in love with chocolate after humans had introduced it to the galaxy).

"As sure as I can be with what we got here." He answered, not taking his eyes off his tablet. "I've redone the same test half a dozen times and they keep giving the same answer."

"But even if our data is PERFECT and there's no way it could be with equipment of such low quality. Will anybody believe us when we are so obviously biased?" Rayna asked as she continued to pace, finishing off the candy bar and reaching for another.

"I know, I know." Mike tried to placate. "But it's the best we got."

Even if we had better equipment to run these tests, that's not enough. We need a fresh set of eyes on this. I'm still having a hard time believing what the damn results are saying!" He drew the tablet in a huff. "Even if we had top of the line gearâ€|" He let the sentence hang.

Rayna stopped pacing and put a comforting hand on Michael's shoulder. Telling him "You're right. We should get somebody else involved. What about that sangheili doctor who came by the other day? He's not human or asari so he can automatically be more objective than we are."

"That depends." Mike answered cryptically. "If he's one of the younger generations, he might be willing to help us. They're usually more open and willing to talk with us humans. If he's one of the older generations, the ones who fought in the Great War, he'll try to keep his distance. They don't feel comfortable being around us after what they did. Even if us younger generations don't hold a grudge against them for it."

The matron brooded on that for a moment. She couldn't imagine hating anybody the way that all too many humans hated the Covenant Races (and were often hated in return). But Rayna was a naturally kind and compassionate person, so that said more about her than the asari in general. Finally she replied, "Well ask him anyway...the worst he can say is no."

'That or skewer me with an energy sword.' Mike thought to himself, only nodding his assent to Rayna. It was one of the qualities that he loved about her, but for all the centuries she had on him, Rayna could be amazingly naive sometimes.

****APUFMKII****

For the Covenant, there was very little that was capable of shaking the faith and strength of the alien confederation. The news that had just been brought before them by the prototype craft had done just that. Prompting the Arbiter to call forth a meeting of not just his advisors, but his closest compatriots.

The Sanctum of the Hierarchs was one of the few, most secure places that the Arbiter chose to hold meetings such as the one he had called for. As they all filed into the chamber, Thel waited patiently and in silence, a sign for those who entered to do the same. It was only after the last attendant entered, a quarian by the name of Kal'Reegar, his quarian advisor for matters regarding interstellar conflict, did Thel share the news.

Needless to say, the information had not been well received in the slightest. The UNSC having the NOVA bomb was terrible enough, but now another nation had a similiar, if weaker weapon as well? Compared to the Covenant's usual method of Glassing a world, they were starting to fall behind in the 'World Ending Weapons' race.

The Arbiter's advisors tried to talk to their leader of the New Covenant, trying to urge him to go to war. If not with the entire Citadel Council, then the Turian Hierarchy alone. How they could not allow these kinds of weapons to proliferate.

"With all due respect, sir...that's total lunacy." the Quarian Marine

said loudly. The sangheili advisors bared their teeth and growled at what they considered to be a young upstart.

"And you hatchling, should learn to silence yourself!" One of them snarled, one the advisor's eyes milky white from an old wound. "What would you know that would be of any worth? Your race may have been accepted, but not yourself within this Council. I-"

The advisor silenced himself as Thel raised a hand. "It is often surprising what the freshness of youth may see, that by our aged views may have remained unseen otherwise." He chided the advisor who bowed his head in submission. "Now then, speak your mind young one. Why do you think it is such 'lunacy' as you say, and what would you do in my place?"

"First let me ask everyone here a question...who do you think the turians are building these bombs to fight?" Kal'Reeger patiently asked.

"The humans of course." An advisor, this one a Kig-Yar or Jackal, as the humans called them, answered. "But who's to say they won't turn them on us. I certainly would consider doing such."

"Yes...but who is the greatest threat to the New Covenant right now?" the quarian continued.

"Again, the humans." The same advisor answered. "Just where are you going with this, hatchling? You ask obvious questions for obvious answers."

"That just my point! the answer is or at least should be obvious. Humanity has been acting as the New Covenant's enemy since the war ended...why should we help them now? Because they said they're sorry and won't do it again? That's like an alcoholic promising never to drink again or a male who puts his mate in the hospital all the time saying he'll never hit her again; worthless until they do something to back it up"

"While you may have a point," An elite missing the left side of his jaws started, "that does not eliminate the risk the turians and their new weapon may pose against us. While we have done little to gain their ire, in war, such distinctions are usually forgotten. To attack them now, while it may aid the humans, we would be doing so for our own benefit, not theirs." He countered. "Would you be willing to run that risk? If the Citadel and the humans were to wage war, that neither would target us with these world killers?"

"This bomb doesn't change the strategic situation. The Council Races already have enough nukes to render every major human world uninhabitable and eat a big chunk of the worlds in our territory too...but it doesn't matter because they can't reach our worlds...and they still can't reach our worlds now that they have this bomb" Kal'Reeger said confidently.

"As weird as it sound, until they develop Slipspace technology all those nukes and even that bomb are functionally DEFENSIVE weapons" the quarian advisor continued.

There were grumbling and murmurs of agreement. Despite the youth of the quarian compared to most of the advisors, they could not deny he

had several valid points. Thel simply looked straight at Kal, who was doing his best to not fidget under the stare. And was grateful for his polarized visor as it meant he didn't have to steel his features.

Finally, the Arbiter relaxed the stare. "It is often a wondrous thing what the young can teach us. Wisdom is not solely for the old and experienced, and too often we forget that." Thel's lips moved outwards before returning to their normal position. Kal felt that he had just seen the Arbiter had smiled at him. "Until the circumstances change, we shall do nothing against the turians. Our only actions shall be to monitor our borders more closely, and watch for any developments."

Kal'Reeger breathed a sigh of relief at that. There was another important reason for the New Covenant not to get involved, that he frankly hadn't wanted to discuss here. The simple fact that, in his mind at least, the New Covenant fleet wasn't ready for a war. The Quarians and the (ever increasing) people that they had recruited to help them were making progress in learning all the nuances of Covenant technology, and thus fixing and restoring the warships of the New Covenant (which had lacked proper maintenance for months to years, or in a few cases, decades) but they still had a long way to go. And all their work could be undone at this point if the leadership tried to use the fleet before it was ready.

"As you decree, my Arbiter." Everyone in the chamber chorused, their right arms clanging against their chest in salute.

The subject now finished, Thel decided it was time to address another issue that had been on his mind for sometime. Looking at the only quarian in the room as he began to speak. Telling them all "but once we finish rebuilding our fleet we must use it...both to show our own people and the rest of the galaxy that we are strong once more."

Kal'Reeger stared at the sangheili leader in surprise. Wondering if the Arbiter could possibly be talking about what he thought the male was talking about. If he was going to do what quarian leaders had suggested Thel do ever since the quarian people had officially been admitted to the Covenant.

"Once we are ready. We shall invade the Perseus Veil and destroy the vile machines that currently control it, Restoring it to its rightful owners and expanding our Covenant." Thel boldly proclaimed. "Our faith is strong, our Covenant unbreakable. In time, our faith shall be rewarded."

****APUFMKII****

Far from the politics of the Covenant, a new ploy was about to be set in motion by those who thrived within the shadows.

Deep within ONI's Sword Base, a collection of ONI agents, thirteen in all, sat at attention in the sparsely decorated meeting room. A large roki wood table as its centerpiece. The agents present were as unique as they were varied. Some were field agents, others were accountants, logistics managers, or otherwise never deployed to the field aside from the occasional undercover work with civilian targets.

Yet, there were three shared traits between all thirteen. They were all a part of Section III, fiercely loyal to ONI and lastly, they were all women. Incredibly attractive by many standards as well. As usual, Admiral Parangosky kept them waiting. It was a cliché but effective tactic she liked to employ to remind her subordinates who was in charge. As they waited the women awkwardly chitchatted with each other, wondering why their fearsome leader had summoned them all.

Then the door to the room opened, and a blue woman walked in. It took only a split-second for the women to register that fact before they were rising from their seats, hands snapping for their sidearms, the two nearest about to charge forward to take the woman down. Only to freeze as they heard a familiar voice shout, "Check!"

All thirteen were comically frozen in place, their hands gripping their pistols, their bodies entering familiar stances while the two about to charge were comically hunched over. Nobody moved a muscle.

Parangosky smiled at the speed of their reaction. "Stand down ladies, and well done in your reaction." She applauded, "but perhaps you should take a look at what the 'asari' is wearing?"

As the women regained their dignity, pistols sliding back into their holsters, they did as ordered and took a good look at the supposed 'asari'. By appearances, the woman did look alien, but then they noticed what she was wearing, an ONI uniform, with a Commander's insignia on her uniform. But that wasn't possible. There was no chance that the Director would ever accept an alien into ONI's ranks.

Seeing that her agents had processed what she said, the ONI director turned to the 'asari', "Thank you, Agent Katya. You may take a seat." The agent saluted before taking a seat closest. "I assume you all realize what has been done to agent Katya?" They all nodded numbly in surprise. There had been rumors for years that the R&D division of ONI was working on a method to surgically alter agents to appear as aliens, but this was the first real confirmation any of them had gotten that their researchers had actually done it.

"Katya is the first person I've recruited for a special mission to infiltrate the Asari Republics" the head of ONI informed her audience.

"But what about Operation Spartacus? I thought we weren't conducting any other major campaigns until it had been completed" one of the women asked.

"And we will not be." The Director confirmed to their confusion. "Agent Katya's mission, and those who join her, will be strictly reconnaissance. The others however, will most likely be sent to the Terminus systems."

"And what would our orders be if we were part of the latter group, ma'am?" another agent asked.

"To establish yourself somewhere in the region, whether that be on your own or with the others. Then to understand and attempt to integrate into the local power structure." Parangosky replied.

"Just how deep does this disguise go, ma'am?" one of them asked, "will we be able to fully emulate the asari?"

"For this stage, the surgical operation will only be skin deep. It is only your appearance and the feel of your skin, both of which will effectively emulate that of an asari." Parangosky replied. "However, this is only the first stage. As our research goes further, so to will the extent of your disguise. Biotics will only ever be a part should we find a means of incorporating them or emulating them into the human body. It is doubtful we shall ever find a means of effectively emulating the asari's 'melding' ability."

A few of the agents were actually disappointed at the admiral's words. Because biotics could be very useful when they were forced into combat situations. While the asari's touch telepathy could be invaluable in their line of work.

"Are you asking for volunteers ma'am?" an agent boldly asked.

"I am. This operation for those who take it, and progress into the later stages as they are made available, will most likely be permanent. Or at the very least, exceptionally difficult to reverse." She admitted. "And the missions themselves will likely be extremely long term."

"Long term as in years?" one of the women asked.

"More like decades" Parangosky replied although she was thinking 'or more likely centuries if things go according to plan.' But the admiral was too secretive and paranoid to share all her thoughts. Even with trusted agents such as these. Besides, she thought it would be easier to get them to make a decades long commitment once they had been living as 'asari' for a few years.

"But ma'am, the asari can live for a millenium. Wouldn't they notice us aging far too quickly if we lived among them for that long?" a thoughtful operative asked.

"We have found ways around that, although I will not reveal the details except to those dedicated to the program." The admiral spoke with a smile.

Despite her apparent hope for the program, not all of the agents were quite convinced. A long term undercover operation was one thing, but most, if not all of them, were certainly not eager to live out their lives looking like an asari.

"I will be honest...this program's success is vital. Operation Spartacus is ultimately just stage one of the plan to ensure humanity's continued growth. What I am asking you to participate in will guarantee human dominance of the galaxy for centuries to come." Parangosky confidently stated.

"I won't force any of you to undergo the procedure...but you should know that you will probably never have another chance like this in your lives and if you turn it down I will be...disappointed." the admiral continued, putting emphasis on the last word.

All the agents shifted nervously. Disappointing the admiral was a

very dangerous thing to do. At the very least it would kill their careers, but it was all too likely to result in them coming to an untimely end instead.

'I don't want to spend the rest my life bald and blue!' the woman sitting closest to Parangosky , thought. But disliked the idea of disappointing the unforgiving admiral even more, so she was the first to volunteer.

"I accept the task, Admiral." She announced, pointedly ignoring the surprised look of her comrades before they too volunteered for the task. Parangosky looked at the agents with about as much fondness as she was capable of as they all agreed to be surgically altered. Thinking that this Operation appeared to be off to a good start.

****APUFMKII****

Unlike the rest of the Citadel Councilors, Tevos had not gone directly back to the Citadel after witnessing the destruction of Firmus. Instead she claimed that she had private business she had to handle before heading home. The Councilor's private yacht, _Thessian Beauty_, had docked with the _Implacable Justice_, and Tevos had gone aboard to meet Spectre Tela Vasir, who piloted the vessel to the turian dreadnought. As soon as the airlock had closed behind Tevos, the _Thessian Beauty_ had undocked and headed straight for the Relay.

The Councilor had given her new lover a great deal of discretion in how to handle matters after confiding in the Spectre. Aside from letting Tela use her ship she had also given the Spectre permission to act in her name. So Vasir had approached influential asari that she knew held a grudge against the Justicars. Claiming that the Asari Councilor wished to discuss the matter of the Justicar Order with them. Tela had picked her targets well and they had all agreed to meet. Now it was time for the discussion to begin.

Although technically only Tela and Tevos were in the _Thessian Beauty's_ luxurious conference room. The rest of the asari were present via hologram, the large conference table surrounded by seventeen transparent images of them. Waiting on the words of the Councilor and Spectre.

"I gathered you all here because you all hate the Justicar Order as much as I do...but there's something you should know...the Justicars moving against the Republics" Vasir boldly announced. Many of the listeners violently twitching at her words.

"I recently went to the main Justicar temple on Thessia in order to plead with Matriarch Abene to help us combat the humans infiltrating the Batarian Hegemony...not only did she refuse but Abene also said that the asari people as a whole had become soft, that the Justicars were going to take over and force us to militarize under THEIR guidance" Tevos informed their audience.

"That's impossible they don't have that kind of authority!" Matriarch Lavoia, who owned a large shipping company and had lost a daughter to the Justicars protested. "They lost all their political power millennia ago! We pushed them out of it!"

Many of other asari also verbally denied it. None of them wanting to believe what Tevos had just said. Tevos just sadly shook her head. "No, the Matriarch told me, and with such conviction it could only be fact, the Justicars LET us take control. They willingly stepped back and gave us the power."

Matriarch Krakena, who was the oldest one there, had been silent until then. She had been a high ranking police officer on Thessia centuries ago. Krakena had also had more run-ins with the Justicars than anybody else present, including the Order's senior members. Appearing deep in thought since the meeting began, finally she spoke up.

"I believe Tevos. The Justicars genuinely think that the goddess Athame guides their Order. The rest of us are simply sinners in their eyes; unwise and immoral. I am frankly surprised that they didn't try something like this sooner."

Krakena's voice was filled with bitterness. She had lost all too many friends and comrades to the Order over the centuries. Police officers that the Justicars had judged corrupt, or who had simply gotten in the way of Justicars pursuing a criminal. None of the Justicars had ever been punished, they were above the law, and that fact alone had offended the once idealistic Krakena.

"There's also the fact that they expect, and receive, us to submit to their authority whenever they are present. Our laws are disregarded entirely! They only follow their vaunted Code. Everything we've established is seen as nothing by them!" Matriarch Liona, who simply inherited a fortune from her wealthy grandmother shouted. Unlike the rest, she hadn't lost anybody she cared about to the Justicars, but a Justicar had almost executed her for a crime that she had been framed for when she was still a maiden. The Justicars had refused to listen to her pleas, dismissing all her evidence that pointed to her innocence, going so far as to alienate her from all her friends and some of her family. Only the fact that the real perpetrator had been tricked into confessing had saved her. Moreover, the Justicar had refused to apologize. So Liona had never forgiven the Order for what she had gone through.

"But...but if we try to oppose them they'll kill us!" Matron Evilena said weakly. Evilena was a successful author, having written a very popular series of children's books about an ever curious but chronically unlucky maiden. She had never done anything to incur the wrath of the Justicar Order. But some of her older sisters had become drug smugglers, who had been casually killed by a Justicar for their crimes. As a result, the otherwise meek and mild Evilena had a burning hatred of the Order that few could match (nevertheless, she was still not a brave person).

"And if we let them do what they want, we're all dead asari walking anyways" Krakena argued.

"Matriarch Krakena is right. If we let the Justicars take over they will eventually come for us. Their Code is so ridiculously long and complicated that virtually everyone has violated it in some way. Its the perfect excuse to kill anybody who opposes them" Tela said firmly, trying to regain control of the meeting.

"So what's the alternative?" Matriarch Vipos asked calmly. Vipos was one of the most successful drug lords in Citadel space. Working through agents and intermediaries to stay off the radar of the police. Making sure that there was never any solid evidence to link her to any criminal activity (Vasir only knew about Vipos at all thanks to her Shadow Broker connections). But she had always feared that a Justicar would come for her one day.

After all, they could kill her based on (their) suspicion alone.

"We wipe them out first." Tela Vasir boldly answered.

Everyone the Spectre had invited fell silent at that. Although they had all dreamed of doing what Tela suggested, this was the first time that they had heard somebody seriously suggest it out loud. They all hated the Justicars, but all of them unconsciously took the Order's untouchable status for granted (to one extent or another).

"But how? They're our people's greatest warriors!" Evilena exclaimed.

"Yes but there are only about a hundred Justicars. We can easily take them down through sheer numbers alone." Tela confidently argued.

"But WHO will fight them? They're almost universally feared and revered throughout the Republics" Krakena stated sadly.

"Credits are a great motivator to even the most cautious of mercenaries." Tela replied coolly. "Collectively, we all have the funds to organize more than a battalion of mercenaries alone. Whether they be an organized company, or simple freelancers." Tela withholding the fact that she could probably make a request to the Shadow Broker for some of his own elite forces.

"You're forgetting just how much the average asari loves the idea of the Justicar Order. They have been spoon fed exciting stories of brave Justicars battling against overwhelming odds to defeat the forces of evil their whole lives. If we try to wipe out the Justicars all too many people will rise up to defend them or avenge them if we succeed" Vipos pointed out.

"Which is why we will attack secretly and without warning and pin the blame for wiping out the Justicars on somebody else" Vasir countered.

"And just who can we 'pin' for such a plot?" One of the Asari, her identity concealed by her use of an Avina avatar and voice modulator, asked "Whoever is blamed must not only have the resources, but motives and audacity to make such an attack not only plausible, but believable."

"The humans...they certainly have the resources and ruthlessness to do it" Tevos replied, finally entering the conversation after letting her lover dominate the discussion for a few minutes.

"But why would the humans care?" Vipos asked. "Even if they know of the Justicars and their order, which they very well may not, what would their motives be?"

"Why would they care about the batarians? their powerful, ruthless, and treacherous enough to do something like this...believe me it would be well within their capabilities" Tevos explained, thinking about her own capture and imprisonment at human hands (still bitter over her treatment by the UNSC soldiers).

'And if they knew the Justicars were trying to force us to militarize they might ACTUALLY do something like this themselves' the Councilor admitted to herself.

"Yet, as far as their actions have gone, they have not done anything without reason" Vipos countered. "They have disavowed those in the Hegemony, the brief war with them was retaliation for their Colony, they at least claimed Impera was an independent action and even turned over some people for use to execute, and the sacking of the Turian home system was to rescue their savior."

"Do we really even need to explain?" Krakena questioned. "The people are already frightened of the humans, despite all their reparations. We simply tell the people it was the humans, but offer no explanation as to why. Just allow the people to come to their own conclusions and theories."

Vipos pursed her lips as she considered the explanation. It wasn't an unfeasible idea. Simply giving the people a target and letting them draw their own conclusions, the people would do the work for them. Silently, she nodded, signifying her dropping the issue.

"Well, if we are all agreed on this course of action" Tevos started, only to be interrupted as they all started shouting, how none of them had agreed to actually work together, others at how those arguing against lacked courage and/or guts.

Tela simply sighed as the battle of egos raged, only to be distracted as her omnitool gave a distinct 'ping', instantly drawing her attention. It was one reserved for select individuals. Opening up the message, she recognized the alias used by the Shadow Broker.

The heading read, "I've heard of your recent activities, and can assume you're eventual course of action. I believe what I have found will be of considerable use to you." Below were a series of attachments, video recordings by the looks of it. There was also a postscript: "I hope you are successful in your endeavor. I would relish the expanded business opportunities."

Not liking the sound of her other employers words, she opened the files, only to smile as what would have otherwise been chilling content.

"Hey!" The Spectre shouted, the squabbling ending abruptly. "Before any of you start thinking of just how you might survive the Justicars if they come to power, you should probably take a look at this." She tapped her omnitool, the video now playing for all of them, including Tevos.

It shows a scene from the Presidium on the Citadel. They watch as Justicar Taiba was pulling a matriarch out of a fortress like building. The corpses of many guards scattered around the two asari, having attempted (unsuccessfully) to keep the Justicar out, Taiba had shown neither forgiveness nor mercy to the matriarch's

defenders.

"Oh goddess, that's Matriarch Vendula!" Matron Evilena exclaimed in shock.

Matriarch Vendula was one of the most powerful and corrupt businesswomen on the Citadel. She was the CEO of Elegant Solutions, a Defense Contractor for both the Thessian Military and the Citadel Security Forces. Their products were as much pieces of art as much as they were instruments of war. It had been what the company prided itself on. Matriarch Vendula had used her position to sell many of these products to not just legal entities, but the Terminus systems as well. Drawing a hefty profit from Private Military Companies such as the Eclipse, and Thessian Sisterhood, before the former's fall from grace that is. There had been rumors that she used those shipments to smuggle everything from Red Sand and Element Zero to slaves and military contraband. All the while paying off much of C-Sec to look the other way, or eliminating those who wouldn't fold. All those that had attempted to find even a shred of proof of her corruption had mysteriously disappeared or were found floating around the Citadel.

Still, despite her role in the Defense Industry, she was a surprising conservative in the political field. And was one of the most vocal against asari militarization to the surprise of most. Those who knew better realized that should the asari militarize, Vendula would have been forced to share the defense contracts that her company had almost monopolized from the Asari Republics. Something both her greed and pride would never have allowed.

Except perhaps for the Councilor herself (and of course Tela Vasir) everybody at the meeting would probably consider Vendula a peer, or even more powerful. So it was shocking to watch as the Justicar forced the matriarch to her knees. Ignoring the CEO's begging and pleading.

Despite the distance between the camera and the Justicar, they could clearly hear Justicar Taiba's words. "Matriarch Vendula. You have abused and exploited your position, using your power to supply others with the means to end the lives of others, funneling the poison of the Terminus and ending those who would stand against your corruption. By the Code, the sentence for your crimes is death." Taiba stepped up to the still pleading Matriarch, placing a hand on her chin, the other on the top of her head. "May you find peace in the Embrace of the Goddess." With a sickening crack, Taiba twisted, snapping Matriarch Vendula's neck and dropping her.

Everybody attending the secret meeting stared at the screen in shock.

Justicar Taiba had meant to send a message with the public execution of Matriarch Vendula. Attempting to push her mistress's agenda forward. But the Justicars had no idea that those Tela Vasir had gathered had received a very different message from what they intended.

Showing that the Order would now move against anyone it considered an enemy and/or sinner. Which considering the strictness of the Code and the Justicars fanatical devotion to it, would probably apply to everybody at the meeting (and perhaps beyond).

"All right..all right...now the Justicars have shown us our fate if we allow them to remain in power...are any of you willing to accept that?" Tevos asked her audience.

None of them were, they all eventually agreed to join the conspiracy against the Justicars. They were committed now, it was the Justicars or them. And as far as they were all concerned, the days of the Justicar Order were now numbered.

"To sought after power, is to sought after ruin."

-Unknown.

Author's Note:

(aDarkOne)

I realize that we never see any fat asari in the games, but considering how similar the asari are to humans, I think it's reasonable to assume that they could become fat, or build up their muscles like a human bodybuilder.

I figure most asari may be beautiful and relatively slender, but that that's just a generalization. Like Han Chinese being shorter than Caucasians. Yes there's some truth to the stereotype, but its not a hard and fast rule, there are plenty of exceptions.

Besides, I think the asari are more interesting if they can get fat or become bodybuilders.

And this is my (albeit shared) story.

(Follower38)

Quite honestly, I find it a refreshing dose of reality, and to an extent, humorous to have a non-lean asari. Whether that be somewhat heavy, like here, or more ripped than the Stallone. Expect a lot more breaks from canon or presumed fanon, in this story, as we have been doing this entire time.

I must give quite a bit of credit to aDarkOne for a lot of this story. Without him, I have no doubt that this story would never have become as good as it is now. So, please, thank him. (Sorry man, but you deserve the praise).

To all of you readers, please leave a review. Especially if you haven't yet. I don't mind what I call ghost readers, those who fav or follow but don't review, but I'm asking for it. Don't worry, it's like before. We'll keep writing, whether or not you ghost readers review or not.

For those of you who feel we are neglecting humanity, to quote Riddick. "Just wait."

27. Shadow War: Pave the Path to Hell

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk. II

Chapter 27

"...Paves the Path to Hell"

"_When the Spirit reaches its limit from so many lashings, only two courses are left to it: to submit, or to fight." _

Unknown

There were many garden worlds under the dominion of the Batarian Hegemony. But Crematoria was not among them. A planet of two extremes, it was arguably the most hostile planet in the known galaxy, at least within the Hegemony. Divided in two halves by its angle of rotation, one side a burning cauldron of flame and magma, its surface constantly ignited by the rays of the local star. The other a frozen wasteland, near pitch black at all times, the temperatures so slow, any sentient being would freeze solid in minutes, the wind so biting and cold that the snow drifts froze sideways, creating lethal icicles that could snap off and go flying without a moment's notice. The zones where the two extremes met divided by massive mountains so that the two never met.

Yet, despite its apparent hostility to nearly all forms of life, it was among the Hegemony's richest worlds. Deep beneath the planet's surface, massive deposits of ores and minerals flowed through the planet. The raw resources needed by any growing interstellar society. The vast majority of it however, was buried underneath the Crucible, the name of the inflamed half of Crematoria. No machine could hope to survive such an inferno, and since the Hegemony desired those resources, they were forced to dig from the Frost, the name of the frozen wasteland.

Thousands of slaves had died establishing the first settlements. Whether it be from the elements, or by the Impale-Hail, the name given to the icicles that broke off and flew through the window, impaling any poor soul unfortunate enough to be in one's path. Even with the settlements established, the mining efforts were forced to crawl as slaves could only use tools and few machines to mine. Explosives would always cause cave-ins, even in reinforced tunnels, and drilling machines could cause the planet's thin plates to shift and cave in entire networks and affect the settlements themselves.

The settlements themselves were not special, the same features as many of the Hegemony's mining worlds. Slave barracks, refineries, docking locations for freighters and living quarters for the masters. One unique feature was how every structure was connected by an underground network, allowing the residents and slaves to travel between buildings in relative safety. Despite their best efforts, the cold still manages to seep through, both icicles and ice are a common sight, with even snowfall sometimes occur in large enough areas, such as the Central transit stations with train lines connecting all of the settlements.

The truly exceptional feature of the main settlement was its spaceport. For such a small community, Crematoria's colony had a very large and sophisticated spaceport. It was a necessity; due to large amounts of raw materials it exported, and the vast amount of slaves it imported on a regular basis.

The harsh conditions of the planet meant that the company responsible for operations there, the Batarian Mining Consortium, was hard-pressed to find willing workers. Thankfully for them, they had legions of slaves to do the mining for them. The frequency in which slaves died on the planet, whether it was a mining accident, abuse, or the elements was astounding, but the profit the mining produced negated the losses. Crematoria had become so notorious for way it treated its slaves that masters throughout the Hegemony threatened their slaves with selling them to the Consortium for misbehavior.

But those slaves proved to be a key weak point for the Rebellion to exploit. Using the slavers under ONI control they sold large numbers of slaves who were already committed to the rebel cause to Batarian Mining Consortium. Dropping them off directly at the Crematoria spaceport (and smuggling in numerous weapons in the process). The thousands of slaves already laboring in the mines also proved very receptive to the rebel message.

They were already dead men walking (and in a few cases women) and they knew it. Sent to perhaps the worst place in the Hegemony to be quickly and brutally worked to death. They had virtually nothing to lose, and hearts filled with hate for their oppressors.

The Batarian Mining Consortium didn't know it, but its grip on Crematoria was weakening by the day. With their slaves moving further and further away from the servile role that the mining company had intended for them.

All that that was left was a simple...push.

****APUFMKII****

It was a rare sight to see a Citadel Councilor in public outside of the Council Chambers, more so to see them alone without a large escort. But when that particular councilor was a krogan with several centuries of battle experience, one could be forgiven for thinking that an escort wasn't needed.

So no one said a word as Wrex moved through the Presidium heading for the Councilors' Private Firing Range. Built by the first turian Councilor, both as a place to hone his skill with firearms, and also as place simply for him and his old military buddies to hang out, it had gone through numerous expansions and renovations over the centuries. It now included an area for wrestling, a spa and whirlpool, a great deal of exercise equipment, a massage parlor, and a full service bar.

It was probably more accurate at this point, or even decades ago, to call it the Councilors' private resort. A place that only the Councilors themselves (and whoever they invited) had access to. Technically not even the Spectres had unrestricted access to it. Although in practice, once a Spectre had proven themselves, they were usually allowed to use the facilities whenever they wanted.

Of course the Councilors often made an exception for family too, and the fact that the krogan Councilor's brother had been granted unlimited access was an example of that. But Wreav had made little use of the facilities beyond the original firing range itself. Trying

to prove (if only to himself) that he was still the warrior and marksman he once was.

Unfortunately the more he practiced, the more the krogan warrior doubted himself.

Wreav had spent hours under the rubble after the operation against the Spartans at the Castle R&D facility had ended in disaster. Even his robust krogan physique had struggled to survive his injuries. His right hand in particular had been damaged, crushed to paste beneath a shard of red-hot metal, wrecked beyond even a krogan's ability to heal.

Now Wreav was attempting to use a heavy pistol with his remaining left hand. But since he had spent centuries shooting with his right, it was awkward even after weeks of practice. His frustration obvious to his brother as Wrex entered the firing range.

"USELESS PIECE OF JUNK!" Wreav screamed in frustration as he hurled his weapon away. The gun accidentally discharging as it hit the ground. The shot missing the krogan Councilor by only a few inches.

"Wreav, still letting your temper get the best of you, even after all these centuries." Wrex tried to joke as he went to pick up the fallen weapon. The two were the last surviving siblings of their brood as far as they were aware, and had only reconciled the majority of their differences less than a decade ago. Ironically enough, they had the humans to thank for that. After seeing what had happened to the turians, both brothers decided that it was time to talk.

"WHY SHOULDN'T I BE ANGRY?...THE DAMN HAIRLESS APES ARE STILL WINNING AND THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO ABOUT IT!" Wreav ranted.

Wrex just sighed at his brother's reaction, though it was understandable why. "I never said you didn't have a reason to be angry, but that's no excuse for a hardened Battlemaster like you to be throwing a tantrum like a broodling that still hasn't left its clutch!" Wrex shouted, "No matter what insult they've dealt to you!" The Krogan Councilor's own ire peaking.

For a Krogan, one of the greatest insults that could be dealt to them, after the forcible removal of the headplate, was to cripple a Krogan so that they could not fight without aid. A vacuum suit was different as opposed to a prosthetic. "And you're wrong on both counts, Wreav. The Rebels aren't winning, not as easily as they have been before. We've started hitting back."

"How?" said Wreav doubtfully.

"Tactics. Instead of going after them like an overeager broodling that still hasn't done his Rite of Passage, we try the path of patience. They love to harass the Hegemony by raiding their bases and depots. Even the convoys if they get the chance. I've had the Krogan forces station themselves at or near potential raid targets. Every time the Rebels launched a raid since then, they've been beaten back. Without anything to show for it."

"What...what about the Spartans?" Wreav asks with unusual (for him) hesitation.

"That's why I'm here." Wrex answered with a smile. "The people I've talked with think that a Krogan Battlemaster, or perhaps a Warrior could take on a Spartan and beat them in brute force alone. But I've taken steps to tilt the odds in our favor."

Wreav turned away from his brother. Silently brooding for a moment, then admitting "They're stronger than us Wrex...I've thought of us as the galaxy's toughest race my whole life...but none of my boys were strong enough...I wasn't strong enough."

Wrex stepped forward, placing a hand on his Broodbrother's shoulder. "I know Wreav, that's why I came to find you. It's high time that we've changed that back to the way it should be."

"You have a way of making the humans weaker?" Wreav asked in confusion.

Wrex laughed at Wreav's question, a true laugh. "No, Wreav. And it wasn't me. Okeer has found the way to make the Krogan strong again. Strong enough, that the claim that there is no race stronger than the Krogan in the galaxy will be true again." Turning Wreav to look him in the eye, he added. "That's why I came here brother. I'm here to ask you to be the first."

"First what?"

"The first, of Tuchanka's Alpha Warriors."

****APUFMKII****

Since the Rebellion began, the Hegemony had held onto the belief that it was the humans, and especially the Spartans, that allowed these Rebels to grow as large as they had and effective as they were. So long as they were contained on Khar'Shan, however many other Rebellions may begin, they would never be anywhere near as worrying as the one on Khar'Shan.

In the span of less than a single week, the slaves of Crematoria would utterly shatter that belief. At the height of the workday, the slaves were treated to the sight of new arrivals. A batch of turians, krogan and even the odd asari, sent to the planet to work the mines. A good number of them would be dead within weeks, either from the frost or the abusers. At least, that was what everyone had thought.

Turian slave 626 toiled away with his power-hammer, each swing magnified by the mass-effect field generator in the handle. 626 had long since forgotten his name since he was kidnapped just as he was to reach the age of conscription.

As he hammered away at the ore vein, he sneaked glances at the overseer, a hand on his shotgun, unfolded, carefully watching the mining slaves. 626's spirit had not been broken by his enslavement, indeed like many of his fellow diggers, he had been sent to this planet _because _he would not break. While he would have loved to just take his hammer and slammed it against the overseer's skull, he knew that the Overseer would just perforate him before he could get close.

But now things were different. The new slaves spoke of revolution, saying that slaves on the Kar'Shan itself had already begun to rebel. Bringing new weapons and ideas to the dreary hellhole of Crematoria. Telling the slaves already there that the time for revenge against their brutal masters was almost at hand.

Rumors had been flitting around the barracks that it was almost time, that the signal would be given soon. And when it was, the slaves of Crematoria would enact their revenge. 626 tightened his grip as he began slowing his swings, trying to make it look like he was slowing down from exhaustion.

It was supposed to happen today. When the signal happened (which they had been told would be the alarm used to announce an immanent cave in) the slaves were all supposed to turn on the nearest overseers. Killing them and then moving to the guards barracks and administrator centers throughout the colony. Slaughtering everyone not on their side.

But 626 had his own addition to the plan, he wanted to personally take out this particular overseer. He had seen friends die thanks to this one's cruelty. As the time to the signal ticked down, his swings kept getting slower, drawing the overseer's attention. "Hey, 626! What do you think you're doing?! Get back to work!" The Overseer stepped closer, intent on making sure he was heard. "Hey, I said-"

But the overseer (who had never bothered to tell 626 his name) never finished his sentence. 626 swung hard and fast with his hammer, the Overseer's head splattering into pieces as it was violently ripped off. The overseer's blood drenching him as blood gushed out like a fountain from what was left of the batarian's neck, 626 grinning like a lunatic as he watched his tormentor's body twitch twice before falling backwards. Without hesitation, another of the slaves ran to the body, stripping it of weapons, omnitool and most importantly, the keys to their collars.

Then, a red light lit up the tunnels (the cave-in alarm) the normal blue shutting down (telling the other rebels to attack). Gunfire, screams and a collective cheer rang through the tunnels as the other slaves turned on their overseers. "Step One: Break the bonds!" Collars throughout the tunnels popped off as stolen omnitools were sent their signals. "Step Two: Breach Jericho!"

The slaves charged towards the surface access doors, armed with their power-tools, stolen and smuggled weapons. As 626 charged towards the doors, he saw krogan, freed of their restraints prying open the doors with repurposed tools.

Throughout the colony, the guards and administrators were dying as the slaves turned on them. They had grown fat (in some cases literally) off the labor of those they oppressed, failing to demonstrate their supposed superiority in the moment of crisis. A few of the guards tried pleading with the suddenly violent slaves once they realized how utterly screwed they were. But they received the same measure of mercy they had given out (none).

A permanent expression of glee was etched across 626's face as he shattered body after body with his hammer. Shouting along with the rest of his fellow oppressed, "Step Three! Purge the Infection!"

Another hammer blow ended the life of another Hegemony citizen. 626 spied another security force batarian hiding behind an overturned skycar. Without hesitation, he swung againâ€¦

In less than an hour, every single non-slave batarian was either dead or fleeing from Crematoria with all speed. Only one small freighter managed to escape, bearing word of what happened to the Hegemony. "Step Four: Expunge the vermin." Not that such actions were truly necessary.

Because the former slaves soon used the colony's communications equipment to broadcast a message on the strongest signal that they could. "Step Five: Hear our Voice!" Declaring that Crematoria was now a sovereign and independent world, calling on governments like the Turian Hierarchy, New Covenant, Asari Republics, and even the UEG to acknowledge Crematoria's independence.

****APUFMKII****

The Office of Naval Intelligence had had a presence on the Hierarchy world of Jarum since the first humans had arrived there. Gathering as much intel as they could on the Citadel Races, and doing their best to infiltrate the local government (which was difficult, due to the fact that humans weren't allowed to even become citizens on the colony). All while doing their best to do nothing to arouse the locals suspicions.

Nevertheless, most of the assignments on Jarum were relatively easy by ONI standards. The colony was perhaps the only world in Citadel space where humans were popular, and was their main (legal) gateway into Citadel territory. So ONI did its best to not upset the locals.

Janice Jackson was one of the newest ONI agents to arrival on Jarum. She had only recently become a field agent, and this was her first assignment. Being told to shadow and observe a human/asari couple. What made Janice particularly suited for this mission was her lack of bias against non-humans. Having been born during the twilight days of the Second Insurrection, she was also not poisoned against aliens like many others of her generation by her parents.

Although she had no idea why ONI was interested in this particular couple.

Both the human male and asari were doctors who had dedicated their lives to helping the less fortunate. They appeared to be friends with everyone they knew, and what little time they didn't spend with their patients seemed to be almost entirely devoted to their children. To Jackson they appeared normal and wholesome to the point of being boring.

Still, one did not question the orders they were given, especially if those orders were from the Office of Naval Intelligence. Which was why Janice was following the couple through the local farmer's market today, dressed in a blend of asari and human clothing, as was the fashion among both of the aforementioned races on the planet.

At least, she had been following the pair. It was about midday on the colony, and being the weekend, meant it was packed. "Excuse me, pardon me." She squeezed her way through the crowd, trying to find

her quarry. "Coming through. Sorry sir." Squeezing between another two market goers, she finally managed to get out of the crowd. At the last second, her foot was caught on something, causing her to trip forward.

As luck would have it, Jackson landed more or less face first in Rayna's cleavage, making the asari Matron grunt in surprise and fall with her back to a wall. Most women would be shocked and/or outraged Rayna Cardiga's position. But as doctor, and a compassionate person, her first thought was to check and see Janice Jackson was all right.

"Are you all right dear? I didn't trip you did I?"

Janice just sputtered as she tried to recover from the fact that she had her face buried in another woman's cleavage. "I-I-I'm fine. Sorry, sorry." She tried to compose herself but was still flustered by what just happened. "You, uh, didn't trip me. I think it was some kid. I'm fine."

"Are you okay honey?" Michael Smith asked with concern, having rushed to his partner's side when he saw her knocked down.

"I'm fine Mike, she just startled me." Rayna reassured Michael.

"Again, I apologize." Janice kept apologizing, trying her best to try and salvage this situation. She had been trained for a lot of things when working in the field, falling face first into the boobs of another woman, an alien woman at that, was NOT included in the program. The most mortifying fact was that it had been the woman she was shadowing. "I should have been more careful." 'Oh god... my handler is going to kill me for this...' She thought to herself.

But Rayna Cardiga and Michael Smith were very different from the kind of people that Jackson was used to. They saw her as young woman who appeared to be embarrassed, anxious, and possibly injured. So they helped her to her feet and Michael said, "Are you SURE you're all right?...if you hit your head we should probably get that checked out."

Janice stepped back, waving one of her hands back and forth. "No, no. I'm fine. Really, I'm fine." The other was holding her basket holding her purchases, and was sending a signal for assistance, while keeping it hidden from view. "I apologize for so rudely imposing on you like this." She kept trying to get away from the couple, for once cursing just how nice selfless the pair were. Had they been like most any other human or asari, she would have left the area by now and reported to her handler. "I'll be on my way, have a good day now." She tried to leave, only for Reyna to gently grab ahold, but before more could be said, they heard someone call out.

"Darling!" an 'asari' said as she emerged from the crowd, enfolding the surprised rookie agent in an embrace. Whispering into her ear, "Tell them you have a headache, stupid.", right before lightly kissing Jackson on the mouth.

The ONI Agent was in shock she recognized that the 'asari' in question was actually her handler, Katya Geran, who had reported back to HQ on Earth weeks ago. Returning to Jarum just a few days ago.

Although this was the first time that Janice had actually seen her direct supervisor since Geran had gotten back.

Quickly catching on to what was going on, Janice pretended to stumble for a second, falling into Katya's arms. "Oh...sorry about that love, I think I may actually be coming down with something." She moaned pitifully, adding to the act, "I told you it was a bad idea for 'fun time' after so much of that rum you love so much."

"We should get you checked out if you're not feeling well. we'll give you a check up at the clinic at no charge." Michael generously offered.

Katya feigned surprise at the 'news'. "Oh! So you two are the ones helping everyone in this town for free?" She smiled at the couple when they gave her surprised look, "Oh don't be so surprised. I'm a bit of a gossip, even as hidden as you two are, news of two selfless people helping the needy still get around." She flashed an award winning smile, "And thank you so much for the offer. We would really appreciate that."

As the four made their way to the Community Health Clinic, they all chatted about their lives on Jarum. Of course everything the two ONI agents said was lies, and Katya did most of the talking on their side. Trying to put the doctors at ease, and convince them that the two agents were a nice human/asari couple, just like Rayna and Michael.

But once they reached the modest building that functioned as the clinic, a sangheili was waiting for Smith and Cardiga outside.

Both ONI agents froze for a sec at the sight of the Sangheili, despite this one's apparent youth and lack of experience. He, since both of them had been trained to be able to tell the genders apart, was small for his kind, under the seven feet in height that was the norm. The lack of scars and muscle build-up also pointed to the fact that this one had not trained or been in any fights. Even a Sangheili Minor, the lowest of their soldiers, had a number of scars from training.

"So...who's your friend?" Katya asked, keeping the nervousness out of her voice, even as she reached for the holdout pistol strapped under her clothes.

"Oh this is Doctor Voro Tulum, he's helping us on a little...project were working on." Michael said awkwardly. For he was a man uncomfortable being secretive. For such a thing went against his basically good and honest nature.

Voro just huffed at the new arrivals, his way of greeting them, before turning his attention to the doctors. "Cardiga, Smith, you did not say that you would be bringing others to our discussion. I might be unblooded, but my uncles taught me well enough." He narrowed his eyes, his lips flanging for a second. "It is your decision, but I have the results with me." He tapped a tablet that he held his talons.

But for all their good and trusting natures, Smith and Cardiga weren't stupid. So Rayna looked at their new 'friends' and said "could you please wait out here for a minute while we talk to our

colleague?" With Michael adding a moment later "sorry but our own medical standards demand that these procedures be confidential."

Katya just waved them off, "It's alright, I understand. We'll just wait here until you get back." Referring to the waiting room, as sparse as it was. The two doctors nodded their thanks before turning their attention back to Voro and moving to another room, closing the door behind them. As soon as the doors closed, Katya dropped the facade before tearing into the rookie. "You idiot! Just what were you thinking, getting that close to them?" She whispered, so as not to be overheard.

"Well you said to closely observe them!" Janice replied defensively. "Besides, we're at the clinic now, and we can probably start making regular visits here now if we become their friends."

"That's only because I managed to save you before anything else." Katya retorted, "Still, good job back there, playing along like you did. I thought you were going to pass out after that kiss."

Janice blushed profusely, "T-t-that, I wasn't expecting you to do something like that!" She squeaked. "And why do you even look like an asari anyways?"

"You shouldn't even be asking a question like that in public. AND I wouldn't even consider answering here and now, if better agents than you hadn't already determined that there's no surveillance in this area other than ours." Katya replied coldly.

Janice bowed her head meekly, 'I'm just a rookie', she thought to herself, not daring to voice such defeat. Glancing at the door the three doctors had disappeared behind, she asked, "Should we try to find out what that Sangheili was here for? I never thought I'd see one of them as a doctor of all things."

"As I was just telling you, we have the place bugged," Katya said contemptuously as she used her neural implants to listen to the conversation in the other room. Smiling triumphantly at the younger agent a moment later. Spelling it out for Janice Jackson directly.

"This is what's its all about little girl...Voro has just confirmed their findings telling them its a VERY strong match. Which means you're going to see a lot more blue ONI agents in the near future."

"What's a match?" Janice asked in confusion.

Katya's initial impulse was to let the younger woman stew in her own ignorance. But if she read Michael and Cardiga right they would soon make their discovery public anyway. So she told Jackson. Grinning like a predator as Janice gasped in shock.

****APUFMKII****

In another part of the Hegemony, at one of the increasingly more secured military bases on Khar'Shan, Datak Korra and several of his 'peers' and subordinates were in attendance of a meeting discussing the latest event: The Uprising on Crematoria.

"The Department of Information Control has largely managed to contain the broadcasts coming from the planet." A Captain said, "They've set up Electronic Countermeasure Jammers in orbit of the planet, no more broadcasts are escaping the area." The insignias on his uniform marking him as part of the actual department, rather than just relaying information given to him thirdhand.

"Suppression of the initial broadcast has already since begun," the captain continued after no one spoke up, "Damage control has proven to be effective, but parts of the broadcast are still being recorded and retransmitted by later-generation sources."

"So in short," Another officer, this one a general, spoke up. "Your department has utterly failed to do anything in effectively silencing this broadcast." A series of nods went around the room as other officers agreed with the general. "So, for once the DIC has actually fallen flat. It's about time someone humbled you, however the circumstances are."

"As that may be," Datak Korra said before anyone could offer a rebuttal, having grown tired of the bickering, "our primary concern should be Crematoria, specifically, what we are to do now."

"We don't have to do anything right away, the rebels on Crematoria have no warships and few spaceworthy vessels at all...moreover the population there has always had to import all its food, we can simply starve them out" the DIC Captain explained.

"And the risk of them figuring out a means of breaking through the jamming signals?" The previous general rebuked, "That mining colony has some of the strongest and most durable broadcast systems in the Hegemony, as you all know. Something that's needed to maintain constant contact."

"And the longer this goes on, the chances of an outside entity taking notice grows with each passing day. No matter how isolated or unknown the colony is. I'm speaking from my own personal experience." Korra added.

Datak Korra's career had first gotten a boost when he was a young soldier who had, through admittedly more luck more than skill, killed an STG operative who had been investigating batarian raiders, said operative having established a safe house on the border world where Korra had been stationed. Thanks to Korra's talent for self promotion, he had used that early victory to put his career on the fast track, telling the events of that day in such a way to his advantage. Altering his image in the eyes of many. And over the course of several years, he had shot through the ranks due to a few key victories. Victories that the High Admiral had earned, rather than been gifted through luck. Though he had never forgotten that early lesson in how perception could be more important than, and even define, reality.

He recalled how during a batarian skirmish with a minor Terminus power, he and the platoon under his command had silently seized the second largest city on the planet. Only for things to nearly go wrong and abandoning the subjugation of the planet entirely when evidently one of the other colonies took notice of the silence and called for help.

"If that's the case, perhaps we should just gather whatever forces we can, then simply overwhelm the rebellious slaves through numbers and tactics." Someone suggested.

"And you have obviously never lead an actual fighting force on the ground, Uro." A general rebuked. "Crematoria is a nightmare to fight in though, our troops can't fight outside at all without a lot of protective gear and the settlements themselves have no wide open spaces, most of the colony is made up of tunnels that can easily be caved in or blocked, we could lose hundreds to thousands of troops trying to seize those tunnels" General Quso explained.

"There is also the threat that they broadcasted as well. One that was thankfully jammed before it could even leave the planet." The DIC officer added. "They have threatened to simply level the entire colony, along with the mining network should any Hegemony troops attempt to, in their own words, 'claim the first Free Nation of the Batarians'."

Most of the officers fidgeted uncomfortably at the words. No major batarian settlement had been truly independent of the Hegemony since their species had begun to colonize other worlds. Their self-interests, upbringing, and ideology compelled them all to deny the very idea. Yet the slaves on Crematoria had seized the world all the same.

"We need to admit to ourselves what kind of enemy are fighting; these radicals consider it a victory to hurt us, even if they should die in the process. Should we try to reconquer Crematoria, they will gladly fight us to the last, and make our forces pay in blood for the victory, along with destroying as much of the colony's infrastructure as possible. They would rather die as martyrs, then even consider living under our rule again." Korra bluntly stated.

"So, what are we to do then, sir?"

Korra leaned back in his chair as he contemplated the question. Every scenario he could think of regarding Crematoria, there was always losses of some sort. Biological weapons, while normally all too effective, were virtually useless on Crematoria. The safeguards used to keep out the extreme temperatures and maintain a habitable environment, also served as quarantine measures. The slaves would be able to contain any sort of viral outbreak. Chemical weapons would make the mines inaccessible until the weapons lost their effectiveness, which could take decades if not centuries. And as Quso had explained, a conventional assault was out of the question.

In the end, the High Admiral saw only one option. "We level the colony." Shock and disbelief was the shared reaction by all those present as he continued. "Whatever option we take will be either inefficient or result in significant losses. The colony is lost to us no matter what happens. The rebellious slaves will see everything be turned to rubble and ash before it is taken from their hands. We simply shall accelerate that decision."

"YOU CAN'T DO THAT!" the representative from the DIC said indignantly.

"Of course I can. I command the batarian military, NOT the Department

of Information Control" Korra shot back coldly.

Many of the other officers present wanted to disagree too. Destroying an entire Hegemony colony seemed wasteful at best. Especially considering the fact that there could still be batarian citizens alive on Crematoria. Technically nobody but the President and/or the Senate had the authority to make that kind of decision.

But none of them dared to publicly disagree with Korra. Even though he officially had to report to the President, and was dependent on the Senate for funding, in actuality he could do largely as he pleased. Moreover, prominent enemies of his had a way of simply 'disappearing.' And if they annoyed him enough, their families would too.

****APUFMKII****

Ever since it had been realized by the Rebels that the Spartans, the ones who had started the Rebellion and aided in its growth, were humans, there had been a great deal of wariness when it came to the super-soldiers. Particularly among those who been living in Citadel space at the time of the short lived UNSC/Council War before their enslavement. Those who had been enslaved prior to the UNSC's introduction by gunfire, were quickly filled in on the war.

Those who had been born slaves were used to the idea that people with great power could (and would) exploit those without it. Despite the fact that as rebels, they were explicitly rejecting the might-makes-right philosophy and master/slave dynamic of the Hegemony, it was hard for them to completely shake off the expectation that the Spartans (who were undeniably ruthless and strong) could start exploiting them at any moment.

Many had given the Spartans a wide berth after that. Still, the harsh feelings did not last long as the Spartans continued carrying out their aid and missions, despite whatever feelings against them or that they may have had. Showing stoic professionalism to some, while presenting an approachable front for others.

Then, the Spartan's Assault on the Hegemony Castle Facility happened. While, at the time, it had instilled hope and respect for the Spartans for the harsh blow they had dealt against the Hegemony, something else had taken root as well.

Fear.

The majority of the rebels were coming to see the Spartans as invincible heroes. The Rebellion's sword and shield against the brutal Hegemony. But the more thoughtful and/or cynical rebels were becoming all too aware of just how powerful the humans were, and how dependent the Rebellion was on them. Wondering if and when the humans would turn on them, and try to hurt and exploit them as those in power all too often had.

Cara T'Val was unquestionably the most prominent person in the Rebellion who felt this way. Which was the main reason that Jella Korrigan had not taken her asari lover with her when she had gone to greet the Spartan reinforcements. Leaving Cara behind to take care of the orphan batarian and asari girls that T'Val seemed to have informally adopted.

Jella Korrigan herself didn't completely trust the Spartans (except perhaps for John Doe, the only male Jella could imagine ever willingly inviting to her bed). But her hatred of the Hegemony and desire to see it gone vastly outweighed any concerns about her human allies. Frankly Jella would have willingly allied with the devil himself if it gave her a chance against the Hegemony and its aristocratic elite.

Still, Jella had made sure that the only ones present were those almost fanatically loyal to the Spartans. Essentially who would side with the Spartans should a schism ever occur within the Rebellion, that it ever would.

"So, any idea when your friends will be coming, John?" Jella asked as she scanned the skies, searching for the faintest of blurs that would signify the presence of the human ship. Though, she didn't expect to see it until it was about to touch down. "You know we can't stay too long out here, right? We only have so much time." Jella pointed out, referring to how the Hegemony was always on the lookout for any Rebel activity, and moved in on any potential targets within minutes. The longer they were out here, the chances of their being spotted and attacked rose.

"They'll be here." John answered, not taking his eyes off the night sky. "We won't be staying any longer than we have to."

Jella frowned at the nonchalant way the Spartan had responded, 'It's like he's not afraid of being found at all.' She thought to herself, 'Then again, he does have a reason for that.' She turned her attention back to the night sky.

Suddenly, John spoke up. "They're here." Before she could even ask where, a waypoint appeared in the sky, projected onto the glasses that provided a Heads-Up Display, courtesy of the UNSC, An outline of the still cloaked ship appearing soon after. "Alright let's-" She started to order before John stopped her.

"Wait." Jella didn't have a chance to ask why, nor did she have to. Above, the active camouflage faded, leaving parts of the ONI Prowler exposed to the naked eye.

'Are they planning on just dropping supplies or something?' She thought to herself. 'They can't possibly be thinking of jumping from that height. Nothing could survive that except maybe a krogan.' She got answer a moment later.

A dozen silhouettes fell out from the Prowler's hold, falling through sky, approaching terminal velocity, hurtling for the ground below. At first, Jella had thought she had been right, that it had only been supplies. Then, four more leapt from the craft, nosediving through the air. Jella's jaw dropped, "Are they insane?!" the four figures gained speed, actually flying past the crates that had precede them.

The Rebel leader thought they would deploy some form of chutes, but when that never happened, her concern spiked. Then, they spun. Going end over end, their feet now coming first, their arms stretched out, thrusters on their backs popped open and flared, slowing their descent. Even so, when they finally landed, their speed and sheer

weight combined created a small dust cloud and crater in the dirt.

The crates landed around them in a similar manner, creating more impressive craters and dust clouds. Leaving one Batarian Rebel and one Spartan with a light coating of dirt, the former all but gaping at what just happened. "How did? That's not...this isn't possible!" John just placed a hand on her shoulder, with the unspoken promise that he would explain later.

The four apparent Spartans rose and stepped towards the waiting pair. The first one to approach was a woman, if the way the armor hugged her body was an accurate sign. Her helmet was decidedly different from John's with what looked like a number of optics over where her eyes would be. She snapped off a sharp salute. "Spartans-058, 111, 006, and 120, reporting for duty." John returned the salute, at which point, she relaxed. "Hello John."

John nodded. "Hello, Linda. It's good to see you." He had recognized her the moment she had stood, Linda was perhaps one of the most graceful of the Spartans in how she walked, bested perhaps only by Kelly. That and the sniper rifle that she carried on her back, seeing as she was THE Sniper of Snipers. He turned towards the others, each with their own unique armor. All of them significantly more battle-scarred than any of the other Spartans. Two men, and one more woman. "Jai, Mike, Adriana." He called to them, identifying each of them by their gait and armor. Jai wore the Close-Quarters Battle, or CQB, variant, Mike opting for the Extra-Vehicular Activity, or EVA, armor, and Adriana preferring the privately manufactured Rogue Variant.

Jai stepped forward, "Master Chief. Oops, I mean, Spartan-Commander 117. That is what you're going by now right?" Jai, or rather, Jai, Mike and Adriana were the Spartans of Gray Team, the UNSC's premier team for operating behind enemy lines. With little to no support, and providing the same. The reason for this was that, compared to other Spartan-IIs, they were the most undisciplined of them. And quite easily fit into civilian life.

They just didn't follow specific orders very well. Being more effective with a general goal. Of course, this led to a lack of discipline, nothing on the scale of Diego though. John ignored the jab and just ordered, to both the Spartans and the Rebels, many of whom were still slack-jawed by the Spartan Airdrop, "Alright, everyone grab the supplies and load them up. We're moving out now!"

The Rebels snapped out of their stupor and the supplies were soon loaded and they were all on their way. Gray Team taking the back of one of the trucks for themselves, while Linda, John and Jella shared another.

"So, why Gray Team?" John asked. "The plan didn't call for a specific team, but why them?"

"Lord Hood learned of the Operation, and though he has allowed it continue, the timetable of the plan has been accelerated."

John nodded his head in understanding. Gray Team would fit the role perfectly then, in stepping up the plan's timetable. Their tactics

would deal heavy blows against the Hegemony in a small time frame.
"Tell me everything else that's been happening back home."

In the time that it took Linda to fill John in everything that had been happening both on the homefront and in Citadel Space as far as the UNSC knew, the truck had managed to return to base with no incidents.

The building currently serving as the rebel headquarters was an abandoned bookstore (in one of Overseer City's worst neighborhoods) that was set to be demolished in less than a month. But until then it functioned as a decent base of operations for them. Most of the rebels enthusiastically greeted Jella and the new Spartans as soon as they arrived. But Cara T'Val was absent.

"Where's Cara?" Jella asked, annoyed that her young lover wasn't around to greet her.

"Oh she's just watching some news program with the kids." one of Korragan's followers answered casually.

Jella made her way to the little room she and Cara had claimed as their own. Out of curiosity (and having nothing better to do at the moment) the new Spartans followed her. They found Cara sitting on the floor in front of a large holoscreen (the orphaned asari and batarian girls sitting on her lap). All of them watching the news footage being broadcast Live from the Hierarchy colony of Jarum (via the extranet).

"Cara, why are you and the kids hiding out here?" Jella asked.

"Shh...watch." the little asari girl told the rebel leader, her eyes never leaving the screen. Cara didn't even show any signs that she had heard her lover.

These were the first words the little girl had ever spoken to Jella (being too scared of Korragan to say anything before). So Jella complied, more out of surprise more than anything else. Wondering what could have seized all three's attention in such a powerful way.

Realizing almost immediately that a human male and asari doctor were being interviewed. As they explained their latest scientific findings to the public. The man and asari sitting down and holding hands, a well dressed sangheili standing directly behind them.

"-are the colonial doctors who made the initial discovery, and their colleague who has reaffirmed their findings with his own experiments." A reporter off-screen said before the human doctor, his name listed beneath him as Michael Smith, started speaking.

"When we," referring to himself and the asari, "first started this research, we had done it as a gag, a joke if you will. We had expected to find absolutely no relations between our two DNA samples. After all, why would there be? Our two species grew up light-years from the other, making it all but impossible for there to be any similarities."

"Yes, you can imagine our surprise when we **did **find

similarities." The asari continued, the text on-screen identifying her as Rayna Cardiga, letting the human doctor, who was looking flustered, take a break. "It soon became a near obsession as we couldn't believe our own results, and thought that there had to be something wrong, with either our samples or our instruments. But no, we found nothing." Shaking her head to emphasize her point.

"And what about you, sir?" The cam shifted onto the Sangheili (identified as Doctor Voro Tulum) as someone off-screen asked. "What were your thoughts on this discovery?"

"At first, when they had approached me with their findings, I had thought them to be mad." The Sangheili answered, "Then, at their request, I ran my own examinations. The results were, in a word, incredible. But the science did not lie. Considering I did so with samples of my own, rather than what they provided me." Referring to the two doctors. "The results do not lie."

"Humanity and Asari, share genetic markers. The two races are, without a doubt, genetically related to each other and undoubtedly share a common ancestor at some point in both their histories" Voro continued to explain.

"So the asari and humanity are sister species?" the reporter stated dubiously.

"Not quite...are more like cousins." Rayna admitted. "A precursor race all but certainly interfered in one, perhaps both species' evolution. But before you ask, it is impossible, for us at least, to tell if the DNA was taken from the asari, and implanted into humanity, or the other way around."

"Can you believe it Jella!" Cara exclaimed as she turned away from the news program and turned towards her lover. Staring at the female batarian with wide eyes.

"Yeah...its weird...but I always thought humans looked like hairy asari." Jella said with a shrug. Not quite sure how she felt about this revelation. Although she was fairly certain she cared a lot less than Cara.

"You mean Asari were humans with scales and tentacle heads." Mike said, butting into the conversation. "Don't forget, we were here first before any of you brats."

"The asari started to colonize other worlds and solar systems long before any modern race" Cara said in defense of her people. Offended by the stranger's arrogance and bad attitude. Unconsciously clutching the girls closer to her in the face of the threatening male.

"Sure, you got us beat in that." Mike admitted, though thoroughly annoying Cara with how offhandedly he said it, "But humanity had an interstellar empire before any 'modern' race had anything larger than clans. We're just reclaiming all of that." Not noticing, or rather, not caring about the rising ire of the asari around him, the Spartan-II added more fuel to the fire when he added, "And who basically kicked aside your 'Destiny Ascension' a couple of years ago?"

"Shut up. Nobody here cares about your government's propaganda. And

if you were all really all-powerful, humanity wouldn't need people like us to weaken your enemies." Cara replied angrily, the children in her lap starting to get anxious in the face of the mounting tension in the room.

Mike just snorted at what he considered to be impotent anger. Before he could offer a retort, he heard his CO order, "Spartan-120, end what you are doing." Mike glanced at John, gave a shrug and tilt of his head to show his assent.

Give a half-bow to the incensed Cara, he started moving towards the trucks, "C'mon people, help me unload this gear. First ones get to try out some new toys, courtesy of Misriah Armories."

Under the stern gaze of their commander, the other Spartans shared looks. Uncomfortably aware of the fact that they had made very bad first impression, though admittedly, they had expected this. Mike-120 was a very brash individual, with a very abrasive personality. He always aggravated those not close to him. They had developed a thick enough skin that whatever Mike said never bothered them.

Still, the two remaining members of Gray Team thought it best to play nice. Jai went first, "Spartan Jai-006, Gray Team leader." He introduced himself. "I apologize for my teammate's words and behavior, he is not...humble, for lack of a better term. Do not let his words define who he is. While abrasive, he is incredibly loyal to those he trusts. Were it not for his unwillingness to leave me behind, I would have died several times over."

As Jai stepped back, the remaining Gray Team member stepped forward. "Spartan Adriana-111. Gray Team." She gave them all a two fingered salute. "Look, about my brother, I'm sorry that he's an ass, but that's who he is. I won't apologize for him because that's his job, not mine. Don't take what he said too personally. I've had to live with it since I've met him." Looking down at Cara, she added. "Don't worry about sister, or is it cousin? If he bothers you again, let me know, and I'll sort him out."

With their piece said, the two went off to join their brother in unloading the trucks. John left a moment later, giving the two a respectful nod as he did so. Leaving Cara, Jella, and the kids alone in the room.

"Listen Cara...the humans might be the asari's space cousins or whatever. But they're still the same people that they were yesterday. Remember, most of the people oppressing the batarians ARE batarians. Just because somebody is related to you, doesn't mean that they're on your side." Jella gently explained to Cara.

"I just thought for a moment that; if humanity and the asari were related, it would mean that we were kind of like family. And we wouldn't have to fight" Cara slowly admitted. Her voice little more than a whisper, the little ones in her lap watching the two closely.

"Maybe you won't, the asari aren't the kind to start wars." Jella said reassuringly.

Although in truth she doubted it would be that nice or simple. The obnoxious new Spartan seemed to imply that humanity had some sort of

Manifest Destiny to rule the galaxy, or 'reclaim' it, in his words. She hoped that Mike was just an arrogant hothead. Because if his leaders shared such sentiments, then once the Hegemony was overthrown, they would almost certainly try to use the batarians they just freed to further their own dreams of empire.

****APUFMKII****

Since the Rebels had laid claim to Crematoria, a small fleet of warships had been blockading the Mass Relay, jamming any transmissions outgoing from the planet as well. Now that fleet had increased twofold, reinforcements coming through the Mass Relay. On approach to the planet itself.

There were no transports within this fleet. Frigates and cruisers made up the bulk of this fleet, at its head, three of the Hegemony's dreadnoughts. The fleet had no plans for any invasion. Instead they were on mission to (as the High Admiral had put it) "purge the infection."

The rebels sent out their few ships (all freighters) to meet the enemy fleet. Planning to use the civilians spacecraft themselves as weapons. Ramming them into the Hegemony warships.

But the rebel ships were aging unarmed freighters piloted by people who barely knew how to work the controls. The warships destroyed them without even bothering to slow down. Taking up orbit around Crematoria.

The batarian fleet ignored the rebels attempts to contact them as they took up position around Crematoria. Awaiting the order from Datak Korra. Preparing to unleash a new kind of hell upon those living on the world below.

"It is said that victory belongs to the bold. Accurate, if deceiving. In war, those who are hesitant will surely fall to their adversary's resolve. By that same token however, those who first overstep the bounds of the conflict, may find themselves unleashing a force that they can not withstand."

-Thel'Vadam, in regards to the escalation of warfare.

Author's Note:

aDarkOne: I always thought it was weird that the asari were the only aliens that looked like humans in Mass Effect (except maybe for the Quarrians, but the game developers kept their appearance mysterious until ME3). Add in the fact that it's canon that the Protheans interfered in the asari's development, and it seemed natural to assume that it wasn't just a coincidence that humans and asari look so alike.

Especially given how most of the fandom seems to assume that asari look just as much like women without their clothes on :)

Of course, that actually seems like a fair assumption. Given how many times in the game we see the asari virtually naked, and that nobody comments on the asari having any weird features under their clothes. Besides, if the asari had something like razor sharp nipples they

wouldn't make very good space elves : -]

The character Rayna Cardiga was born from this train of thought. I deliberately gave her a girl-next-door vibe to help illustrate just how much humans and asari are (potentially) alike. And also to just have the perspective of an more ordinary type of person on all these galaxy changing events.

Of course Rayna and Michael are in the crosshairs of the galaxy's Powers That Be now, so time will tell how long they can remain as they were.

Follower38: Well aside from that very disturbing imagery my co-writer just provided, or is it comical, I hope you all enjoyed the chapter. Took a bit of a while, but that's life for you. As you can see, the stakes are rising as Spartan-IIs are taking to the field in force. And it is a confirmation that John Doe is indeed John-117. For those who did not realize it, or more accurately, did not think that it was indeed, 117.

For obvious reasons, he is not the legendary figure as he was in the Halo series, due to the events of Halo: Combat Evolved, and subsequently, the majority of the rest of the series, never occurring as well.

For those of you who think that I am going out of character with Gray Team, well, it's called a fanfiction for a reason. If you have grievance with John Doe being John-117, send me a PM. But please, be reasonable and rational in your reasons, I don't need a fanboy rant. Though, considering the maturity in the majority of my reviews I've received, this request is probably and hopefully a redundant one.

As always, please review and let us know what you thought.

28. Shadow War: Edge of Apocalypse

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk II

Chapter 28

Shadow War: Edge of Apocalypse

"The Great War was perhaps, ironically, that which gave humanity the most freedom it had since the formation of its first nations. It was a war that nothing was held back, nothing was immoral, and all restraints cast aside in an effort to simply survive. Now though, many fear that should humanity ever return to war again, will we be able to show restraint again? Or have we become so addicted to the taste of total freedom in war, that we loathe to abandon it?

__-Jacob Keyes, UNSC Navy Captain(Rtd). On the subject of Humanity's future.__

Crossed Lines

In the skies above Crematoria, the Hegemony task force was now finalizing their formations above the planet. The bows, or fronts, of their ships aiming directly at the planet below. Within the craft, autoloaders locked solid shells of metal into place, missile

batteries were priming as both warheads were armed and boosters were ready.

On the bridge of each of the ships, gunnery crews were working frantically as they calculated firing solutions. In spite of all the advances made in technology, the mathematics still needed a living touch.

And watching the multitude of officers aboard his personal dreadnought Loyal Servant, was the High Admiral Datak Korra himself. Under most circumstances, many others of Datak's position would have simply delegated others to carry out the heinous task that was about to be executed. But that was just another point where the High Admiral stood out from amongst his 'peers'. He preferred taking a personal hand in whatever he ordered his subordinates to do, circumstances permitting of course. Even when he had first obtained his rank of High Admiral, he still personally led entire legions of troops during campaigns in the Terminus systems.

Gaining the respect of the non-commissioned officers under his command, while sending a message to his opponents. 'I am not afraid to walk through the blood and the mud of battle, and my skills are still sharp because of it. Challenge me at your own risk.'

Currently, the entire task force was centered around his dreadnought, with cruisers creating an inner ring around his flagship, the frigates and destroyers creating outer rings outside that. Considering the opposition that they were likely to face, it was probably overkill. But that was the point.

"How much longer until the firing solutions are completed?" The Admiral called out.

"Sir, two minutes until all firing solutions are finished, as according to your orders, sir." An officer answered. "It'll be another four after that for all munitions to be primed and ready, as per your orders again, sir."

"And the fleet?"

"In formation, as of five minutes ago sir. The firing solutions are taking longer to calculate due to how you specified them sir." The same officer answered.

Korra nodded in appreciation of their competence. Events were proceeding according to his schedule. He and his staff had planned this operation in exacting detail. The admiral wanted to leave nothing to chance. Because what Korra had planned was NOT a battle.

It was a statement of intent, for both Datak Korra and the Batarian Hegemony itself. That the Hegemony, no, that he would not stand for such, insubordinate behavior. That no matter how large, or however 'successful' that these unruly slaves, these self-proclaimed 'Rebels' became, that he would turn every single one of their major victories, into a crushing defeat. That they may think they can upturn the Hegemony, but their efforts will only end in annihilation, and the strengthening of the Hegemony's position for centuries to come.

"Just a little while longer, and all this notion of 'Rebellion' will soon die."

****APUFMKII****

Done on the planet below, the scene was best described as controlled chaos. While there were many who were panicking when the news of the Hegemony fleet in orbit directly above them began to spread, the vast majority were shaking in anticipation.

Everyone was assuming that the fleet above had several armies worth of troops, intent of reclaiming the entire mining colony through a conventional ground invasion. The vast majority were eagerly awaiting said army, as they relished the chance to take out all the hate, pain, and anger that had been building up inside them since they had been sentenced to work to death Crematoria, although those who had been born into slavery had far more to avenge.

Scavenged weapons, armor pieces, and the rare kinetic barrier were being passed out among those with the training and experience to use them. Everyone else was in the processing of maintaining their mining tools, many of which were still caked in the blood of their Hegemony victims.

Prisoner 626 was clutching his hammer tightly as he sat listening in the main communications hub of the colony. No one was really trying to direct people from one place to another, aside from picking up water, rations and equipment as needed. So someone like 626, who had no experience with the technology around him, was more or less ignored as he sat and listened in.

"Has anyone managed to break through the jamming signal?" Someone, an asari 626 noted, shouted out. She, and several other asari, had been part of a group that immediately after their arrival, talks of rebellion and insurrection began to break out amongst the slaves. 626 would bet what little he had that she had been part of the initial instigators.

"Negative! I've tried every damn possible technique I know, and even a few I just made up, nothing is getting through." Another asari shouted back. "Damn, since when in the Void were the Hegemony this good at telecommunications?"

"What about the Fleet itself, has anyone managed to open up a communications channel with them at all?"

A batarian signalled no, gesturing that he was still trying but they were ignoring him. The batarian, 626 noted, was using the handsigns taught to all slaves, to communicate with those who had their tongues cut out for one reason or another.

"Where are the troops transports? Why aren't they deploying the army yet?" one of the de facto rebel leaders asked the universe at large, nobody had appointed or elected him to the position, but he seemed to know what he was doing since he arrived a month ago, so everybody tended to listen to him.

The rebel leader was actually a former Hegemony soldier himself. Sentenced to slavery for accidentally causing the death of a high

ranking officer, though in truth, the man had died more a result of his own stupidity than anything else. The former-soldier was grimly looking forward to bleeding the army that had casually rejected and thrown him away, disregarding his years of loyal service.

But the Hegemony fleet showed no signs of deploying troops. The radar screens were utterly void of any contacts or IFF, Identify Friend or Foe, tags. All of the craft that the Rebels had managed to seize were all grounded, none of them were currently in the air.

"Someone get two teams together, and get them onto two of the freighters we have docked." The soldier ordered. "I want one of them to approach the fleet in orbit, try and open up communications with them. The other freighter to head off-world, try and get past the fleet and get our message across the extranet. Maybe it's the planet's weather system jamming us, maybe its the Fleet, but I don't liking sitting around with my thumb up my ass waiting for something to happen."

To the surprise of 626, several of those present ran off to do what they had just been ordered without hesitation. Even those who had not been part of the asari group. After some deliberation, he rose to follow them, thinking that it would interesting to see them carry out their orders.

The few former slaves with any piloting skills raced to the ships. Intent on using the freighters to defy the Hegemony, at least one last time. Spreading the message of Rebellion even farther.

But the Hegemony was expecting them.

As the freighters lifted off the surface of Crematoria, the batarian warships targetted them. Powering up their vast arrays of weapons. Aiming enough destructive ordinance at the unarmed merchant vessels to destroy cities. Ignoring the freighters attempts to contact them.

Then they opened fire.

Shells meant for capital-ship combat and hardened installations all but vaporized the virtually unarmored freighters. Passing straight through them as though they were naught but air, sometimes striking more freighters behind them before impacting against the planet below. Ice cracked and shattered as the sheer kinetic energy broke through millennia old ice shelves, enormous slabs the size of frigates tilting into the air before crashing down below, while shards of ice jumped into the air, and came down with lethal speeds.

In only a single salvo, almost every freighter was vaporized. A few escaping the slaughter by flying down and hugging the planet's surface, avoiding detection and shells alike.

626 looked upon the sight in awe, as the salvo had also utterly destroyed the spaceport as well, simply by sheer location. Almost on instinct, 626 looked towards the sky, only to see more shells shooting down from the sky.

It would be the last thing he, or anyone else on Crematoria for that matter, would ever see again.

****APUFMKII****

High above the planet, the High Admiral watched as a barrage of shells fired by the spinal-cannons of the ships streaked towards the planet, followed by a salvo of cluster missiles, all of them heading straight for the colony.

While most would have seen the planned barrage as gross overkill, or a 'misallocation of valuable resources', Korra did indeed have a reason for it. The opening salvo was meant to utterly level the entirely colony. Living quarters, barracks, the spaceport and communications hub, all of it was to be turned into nothing but rubble. If the shells didn't destroy the buildings outright, the shifting and cracking of the ice would do the job. The shells were also meant to pierce through to the underground sections of the colony.

The clusterbombs were meant to clear out and destroy the rubble created, incinerating any survivors from the initial salvo and clearing out the entire surface to give as much as a clean access to the underground network and as a result, the mining tunnels themselves.

"Firing final salvo."

Datak Korra savored the moment. He knew that, considering all the firepower that had already hit the colony, virtually all the rebels were already dead. But this was meant to annihilate any survivors, and destroy any monuments to this uprising. Smiling as the nuclear missile struck the surface.

The nuclear detonation all but disintegrated what remained of the heart of the colony. The force of the nuke melting everything directly outside ground zero, moments later smashing through the remaining tunnels. Nuclear fire raced through them, incinerating everything inside the tunnels, the walls themselves melting from the heat and radiation, burning as deep as they could before losing their energy. The radioactive fallout scarcely beginning to fall from the sky before a second city-buster Class nuke slammed into the crater, further deepening the hole, and sending fire up the tunnels yet again. Water poured in as the flame and radiation melted the surrounding ice, steam bellowing into the air as water was vaporized by radiation.

Then a third one hit, splitting the bedrock apart, it created a new fissure in the now exposed planet's surface. The nuclear fire reaching the deepest parts of the tunnel, ensuring that nothing survived. As the nuclear fallout began to finally fall, water still poured in from the leftover heat, melting the long frozen ice. In time, it would freeze again, forever trapping the radioactive dust and ash, all that remained of the mining colony, within the ice.

Datak Korra had decisively ended the rebellion on Crematoria. By ensuring that there was nothing left to recapture. And nothing left for anyone to save.

Yet, for all his experience, he failed to recognize one thing. Throughout this 'conflict', if it could be called that, many lines had been crossed by both sides. The Rebellion in particular. But with

his actions, it now meant that quite literally, nothing was off the table. Not anymore.

****APUFMKII****

"So...we're 'cousins' to the filthy hairy mongrels thenâ€¦" Treeya Nyxeris muttered to herself as she nursed the drink in her hand. Several bottles littered the floor of her Palaven apartment, the result of the quote unquote 'news' that she had just seen, broadcasted through all of Citadel space, and more than likely human space as well. "Pathetic, people are so afraid of the humans that they'll do anything to appease them. Cowards, the lot of them."

Tossing back the rest of her drink, Nyxeris thought to herself, '_Those two so called doctors have to be frauds, peons of some higher power dancing them around like puppets on strings.'_ She looked at the glass in her hand, a reflection of the viewscreen on it, which was still playing repeats of the interview and the reactions of people, some of whom were apparently actually pleased by the news. Thinking that perhaps it could be the stepping stone to some greater alliance and improved relationships with the humans. "Damn traitors, all of them!" She threw the glass at the screen, shattering them both.

Her chest heaving, her inebriated mind cleared somewhat as traces of adrenaline, or the asari version of it, coursed through her system. As clarity returned somewhat, she registered the fact that someone was at the door and was ringing the bell. Quite incessantly actually. "Who in the name of the Goddess is that?" She grumbled, walking towards the door. As soon as it opened, she shouted, "What?!"

Pallin Jared, chairman for the governing board of the Sons of Impera, stared in surprise at the usually composed and well dressed matriarch. Treeya Nyxeris stank of sweat and booze, her clothes were mismatched and rumpled, and her eyes looked bloodshot. Frankly, if Jared had just stumbled into her by accident, he probably wouldn't have recognized Nyxeris.

"Well," the chairman started, "I first came to check if you were well. You haven't been answering any of our calls or messages. Apparently you are not."

"Yeah so what if I didn't answer my messages?" She spat. "I'm entitled to my own life."

"Yes, you are." Pallin agreed, "But considering that you always promptly answer any calls or messages from the Board, or me for that matter, I thought something had happened." Glancing over her shoulder he asked, "Maybe we can continue this inside? So as not to be so public?"

.

"Oh come inside then." Nyxeris said irritably, stepping aside to let the turian in.

Pallin nodded his thanks, taking care to avoid the liquor bottles scattered here and there throughout the apartment. "So," he started as he sat in, what he hoped was, a clean chair. "Just what happened

that you were ignoring us?"

"I just needed...to clear my head. After hearing those awful lies that fat traitor Cardiga is spouting." Treeya slowly said. But even though she didn't want to admit it, even to herself, Nyxeris wasn't certain that Doctor Cardiga was lying. Because the humans WERE too similar to asari, physically anyway, for it to just be a coincidence.

"Clear your headâ€¦" Pallin started as he looked over the mess that was the apartment. "Well, perhaps you should actually try thinking about it, instead of drowning yourself in cheap booze?" He asked.

"The only reason I can't afford GOOD liquor is because I gave most of my money to the Sons when we were still getting started...REMEMBER!" Nyxeris replied indignantly.

"Yes, I do remember. And the entire organization is **extremely** grateful for your early donation." Pallin tried to appease, after all things considered, those credits had been what allowed the Sons to become such a political powerhouse right from the start, rather than having to grow from an extremely small group reliant on mass donations. It was also the reason why the Matriarch was made the treasurer, aside from being the one who would most effectively ration out the funds as needed, the vast majority of it was still her money. "Still, whatever you or I may believe about those doctors, it has created a new, and rather considerable, problem for us. Or for you, I should say."

"WE'RE NOT RELATED TO THOSE HAIRY APES!" Nyxeris shouted. The asari had hated humanity with a passion ever since the humans had destroyed Impera. Killing most of her family and destroying the business she had spent a lifetime building. Leaving her with little more than her money and hate.

The money was long gone now, spent to build up the Sons, but the hate remained just as strong.

To Pallin's credit, the shock from Treeya's reaction didn't completely paralyze him. Though he did feel the need to tap his earholes as he felt slightly deafened. "Considering your reaction, I guess that you already understand the problem. The asari are going to be seen as, if not allies, then sympathizers with the humans. That is going to generate mistrust, which will turn into caution. You can see where I'm going with this."

"The humans will attack asari worlds too eventually." Nyxeris said with conviction. No doubt in her mind that humanity would eventually hurt the Asari Republics the same way that they had scarred the Turian Hierarchy. "And once that happens nobody will doubt that they're our enemies."

"I stand corrected, you are still failing to see my point." Pallin countered. "What I was implying was that until something happens that irrefutably marks the humans as enemies of the asari, people will see the asari as secret agents or sympathizers of the humans." Before Treeya could answer, he pressed on. "I very much doubt that the UNSC will do anything to achieve that. The only other option is for the asari to prove that they are against the UNSC, not just by words or

promises, but by action. Until either of those happen, you should know as well as I do, virtually all asari will now be viewed with suspicion."

"You want the Republics to war to war with the humans now! But, *hic* but they're not ready! My people would just be slaughtered!" Nyxeris protested, her drunken and hate filled mind automatically going to the worst case scenario.

"And did I ever say it had to be the Republics that would be doing this?" Pallin asked. "I said the asari. That means individual, small groups, independents, etc, etc."

"Like that mercenary you recruited? Jona something?" Nyxeris said in confusion. Not sure where the chairman was going with this.

"Not quite. Rather than all of the asari, it is a better idea to solidify your people's reputation in our organization first and foremost." Pallin explained. "There are many amongst our numbers that would love nothing more than to fight the humans and their traitorous allies in the Hegemony, yet many lack the means to do so. If the asari were the ones to lead the charge...you recall the idea I suggested in one of our last meetings; that of a 'splinter' sect? A more militant sect?"

"Yeah...but what does that have to do with that slut Rayna Cardiga and her lies?"

"Spirits, give me strength and fortitude!" Pallin muttered to himself at the usually perceptive Matriarch's thickheadedness. "I'll speak more plainly; having our asari members entering the Hegemony to fight the Rebels and their human allies will wipe away any, or at least most, notion that our asari members will ever betray the Sons."

"You want unrestricted access to treasury funds to build your private army." Nyxeris replied, finally figuring out what Jared was getting at.

"You want unrestricted access to treasury funds to build your private army." Nyxeris replied, finally figuring out what Jared was getting at.

"_Your_ private army, Treeya. Not _mine_." Pallin gently corrected. "If the asari are to regain their reputation as reliable allies within the Sons of Impera, it must be an asari leading them all in the fight against our common foes. If I were to lead them, it would be cause for doubt. If you were the one to lead them, there would be little cause for doubt." Anticipating her possible protests, he continued, "I have already taken steps for that goal. I have a list of those within the Sons that would be most useful for this operation, as well as possible trainers and teachers. Along with the...tools, for such an endeavor. It's all been bought and paid for already." Pallin said, answering the unspoken question.

The STG was also a fan of this idea, which was why the covert ops group was willing to give Jared the funds to get started, though acting through several intermediaries. But Pallin's STG contact had made it clear that this was a one time thing. In the future, Jared had to find the money to keep the militia running himself. Which was

why he was here.

However, Nyxeris was in no state to question Jared about these things.

So she simply said "Mine?...but but I'm no warrior."

"I'm not saying that you have to be in the frontlines yourself, but you can be the face of the organization. Proof of your own resolve and that of the asari race itself." Jared replied.

"Think of it: Treeya Nyxeris could be the asari who showed the galaxy that the eldest Council Race WON'T bend their knees to humanity. And be the one who showed off the strength of the daughters of Thessia."

Nyxeris was an old and experienced matriarch. Intelligent, shrewd, and well-informed. She was not usually somebody easy to trick or manipulate. But Treeya was drunk, angry, and afraid. So it was all too easy for her to believe the much younger turian male.

"Alright, I'll do it!" Treeya agreed. "But I'm going to need help with this. A lot of help. I wasn't one of those maidens who ran off to join a mercenary guild. I paid my dues, I lived the good life. This, this is beyond me."

Pallin just smirked as he withdrew a datapad from his person. "I think, that you'll find that these people will be more than enough."

Treeya briefly scrolled down the names, a few briefly catching her attention but most were unknown to her. Then one captured her attention, Desolas Arterius.

****APUFMKII****

UNSC HIGHCOM prided itself on being well informed. It was why they had given the Office of Naval Intelligence so much free reign before, during and after the Great War. Because whatever unscrupulous activities they may have been up to, with or without HIGHCOM's approval, they had always delivered on intelligence. So when Doctor Cardiga and Smith's public announcement hit the extranet, without their prior knowledge, the entire command sect was very annoyed. As a result of this, Lord Hood had summoned what was perhaps the only high ranking member of ONI that he trusted. Ambassador Alan Denton.

Well, Section III of ONI if one was to be precise. There was less animosity between HIGHCOM and the other branches of ONI in comparison to Section III. While most of Denton's time was now preoccupied by his diplomatic role, he was still a member of ONI. And so still had the clearance to learn of less...official, actions and meetings. There was also the fact that compared to Paragonsky or even Halsey for that matter, he was far easier to deal with. While direct like Halsey, he wasn't as manipulative as his supposed superior, the Section III Director.

Hood set down the approval requests as his personal AI's, Geronimo's, avatar materialized. "Sir, Doctor Denton has arrived and is waiting outside the door."

"Send him in." Geronimo nodded before dematerializing, the doors to Hood's office opening with an almost silent hiss.

Denton stepped into the office, stopping before Hood's desk and standing at attention. An unusual sight from the doctor who usually disregarded titles, ranks and formalities unless it was called for. Though admittedly, Hood was one of the few individuals that Denton actually both liked and respected and behaved as such.

"You called for me, sir?"

"Yes ambassador. I wanted to know what ONI knew about our connection to the asari" Lord Hood said bluntly.

"Permission to relax first, sir?" Hood nodded and gestured for him to take a seat. "To answer your question sir, they don't. Or rather, they didn't until today. Suspected perhaps, but not known."

"Go on." Hood encouraged.

Denton was not surprised at Hood's lack of outward reaction. It was why he respected the man, he didn't overreact. "ONI, Section III in particular, suspected that either the Forerunners, or even our Ancestors, had interfered in their natural evolution at some point. UNSC Smart-Type AI Mjolnir was the first to arrive at such a suspicion, during our...second negotiations with the Citadel Council." Referring to the 'negotiations, if it could be called that, aboard the UNSC Era of Retaliation several years ago.

"And you did not see fit to tell the rest of us?" Hood asked coldly.

"It was only a suspicion, and it was included in the final report from that day." Denton replied. "Though admittedly, I did confirm the connection for myself, relatively recently."

Hood did recall a footnote mentioning such an idea, but compared to the rest of the report, it had seemed largely inconsequential at the time, especially without concrete evidence. "How?" Though admittedly, Hood was using all of his self-control by this point to contain himself. While having been kept in the dark by ONI was nothing new to him. Keeping information this magnitude was testing his patience.

"The Forerunner Archives." Denton answered.

"The Forerunners created the asari?" Hood replied, wondering why the ancient aliens would do such a thing.

"No, the asari were their enemies." Denton corrected. "Or rather, they fought with our ancestors. According to what little historical data I could find, the asari lived among First Ascension Humanity, and fought beside them in the Human-Forerunner war. Though, it seems their biotics was a later addition by a third-party. While it does suggest an ancient asari empire, I think our ancestors bio-engineered them, or at least, genetically modified them. It would explain why they look so much like us."

"The last part is all theory though," Denton added, "Still, it's the only one that fits. Sir."

"But why would the ancient human empire create blue women that can breed with anything?" Hood asked. Of course even as he asked the question some rather perverted possibilities occurred to him. But the admiral hoped that there was no truth to such thoughts.

"I don't think they did." Denton began to explain. "That little genetic trump card of theirs, being able to be impregnated by choice and virtually any sapient, possibly sentient race, might not have been their design. Or at least, it wasn't planned. It's possible that it might have been a stroke of good fortune. Unplanned, unexpected, but seen as incredibly beneficial. The other possibility is whoever gave them their biotics, gave them that ability as well."

"That doesn't sound plausible. Our technology isn't nearly as advanced as theirs was, and we wouldn't do something like that be accident." Lord Hood said doubtfully.

"As for your other idea; do you think it might have been the Protheans? Doctor Cardiga seems to think that they are probably responsible for our races Common Ancestry." the admiral continued, thinking back to some of the things that the asari doctor had said during her public interview.

"The biotics? Most likely. Their reproduction? Possibly. The Asari themselves as a whole? I can say with certainty, no." Denton ticked off. "Our Ancestors and the Forerunners were capable of genetically engineering themselves in such a way, that it would make the Spartan's augmentations seem like child's play in comparison. They were able to create entire worlds and installations nearly the size of a moon if what has been uncovered in the Archives are accurate. The creation of the Asari was well within their reach."

"Assuming that the ancient humans DID create the asari WHY did they do it? I can think of some rather unsavory reasons a man would create a beautiful woman with complete control of her fertility, and I hope that we don't have to admit to the galaxy one day that our ancestors created them for perverted reasons." Hood asked.

"That might very well be why." Denton admitted. "Perhaps they were made as a servant race, or it was a gimmick of an idea that took off. We don't have much knowledge of our ancestor's society. For all we know, they could have been one that thought slavery as socially acceptable. The asari do certainly fit the bill as a perfect servant race for them, when one thinks about it."

"Yes, well I hope you're wrong. Our status as Reclaimers is built on the achievements of our ancestors. But if those ancestors were slave owning perverts, that puts everything in a very different context." Hood explained.

Denton shrugged slightly. "As I said, it's a possibility. Unless we find an intact Ancestor Database, which I doubt since we haven't even found scrap metal from them, its going to stay a theory until someone invents time travel."

"All right, that just leaves the most important question, Denton: why didn't you see fit to tell me or somebody else outside of ONI?" Lord Hood said coolly as he stared straight into Denton's eyes.

"ONI doesn't know either." Denton corrected, to Hood's shock and surprise. "I learned of the connection almost three years ago. I sometimes spend my free time looking through the Archives, and it was right there in front of me. I had assumed that someone else would find the same data, since I didn't make any attempts to actively hide it. And respectfully sir, I didn't want all the attention and red tape that would come with revealing it."

"Do you think Parangosky and her inner circle knows?" Hood asked bluntly.

"I doubt it. The data wasn't anywhere where Section III would want to look in the archives. The only ones who would find it are those who wanted to learn more about the Forerunners."

To Denton's surprise the usually surprise professional Hood chuckled and said, "You really are an arrogant young sonuva bitch, aren't you? Denton you might be the smartest person working for the Office of Naval Intelligence, but they have many, many smart, curious, and dedicated people. Parangosky already knew I'm sure of it now."

"If she or any of her lapdogs do, I haven't heard anything."

"I wouldn't have told you in her position, and to be blunt I'm not sure that I can trust you after learning that you were keeping something this big to yourself." Lord Hood admitted.

Denton frowned. This was not the way he had wanted to foster relations with Hood, especially if he was going to get any answers on what was happening within the New Covenant, specifically with his assistant. Since she had been called back by High Charity, he had been using many of his favors to find out why, where she was and how she was doing. Only to be stonewalled at every turn. He had hoped to use this meeting to get Lord Hood's help, but apparently that was not happening.

"I am sorry you feel that way, sir."

"But not sorry about what you did and you would probably do it again if the circumstances were the same." Hood guessed aloud. Denton just nodded.

"Do you know why I've come dislike ONI Denton? It's because they seem to have forgotten that the Office exists to serve the UNSC and humanity not the other way around. I thought that you had somehow remained untainted by that kind of thinking but apparently I was wrong." Lord Hood said heavily.

"I haven't forgotten that, sir. After all, I'm the one who is constantly trying to ensure that a pan-galactic war does not break out."

"You are a member of ONI, which is part of the United Nations Space Command; humanity's military. And that makes you a soldier, whether you carry a weapon or not. And soldiers MUST obey orders, not blindly but obedience is still required." Hood lectured the younger man.

"Understood, sir." Denton ground out.

"No you don't. You think I'm being unreasonable I can see it in your face. Now tell me if a member of your staff kept something this important from you ambassador, how would you react?" Hood asked critically.

"That's different." Denton protested.

"How?" Lord Hood demanded, and for all his intelligence Denton didn't have a good answer. "Keep me informed next time you learn something like this. I have enough issues with the rest of Section III, I don't need to add you to the list permanently."

As Lord Hood moved to leave, Denton said urgently, "Sir, I was hoping that you could help me find my assistant, Serana. She's been missing since all Covenant citizens were recalled."

"I'll look into it." Lord Hood said dismissively as he left the room. Refusing to say anything more. Because unlike ONI, he didn't make promises he knew that he couldn't, or simply wouldn't, keep.

****APUFMKII****

The leaders of the New Covenant didn't like surprises when it came to humanity. This was because experience had taught them that most surprises were usually bad, such as the revelation that their human enemies were actually the Forerunners chosen successors. Unfortunately the universe did not care about such concerns. As a result, the Arbiter and his advisors had to discuss the latest shocking revelation about humanity, aboard High Charity.

"My Arbiter, I do not see why you are so shaken by this, revelation." Rtas 'Vadum, Thel's closest friend and advisor said.

"I don't see why anybody's that surprised, the asari look like blue hairless humans." Volo Durgan muttered, less to anybody in particular than the universe at large. Several of the other people there just shook their heads in annoyance, because the bitter old warrior always seemed unhappy with everything. "The Forerunners have left their marks on entire worlds, our race's and that of the San'Shyuum before their extinction. It is not difficult to fathom that when they chose the humans as their inheritors, they altered them as well."

"Perhaps the asari are simply descendants of human females, ones the Forerunners blessed with long life and other gifts." one of the more pious sangheili males there suggested, with many others nodding in agreement.

"How will the asari and other Council Races react to this?" Thel asked as he turned towards Kal'Reegar, his quarian adviser and the closest thing amongst his inner circle to an expert on the Citadel Races.

"In the short term, or in the long term, sir?"

"In both cases. I have long since learned that to disregard any possible option or outcome, is to invite failure and defeat in more ways than one." the Arbiter answered thoughtfully.

"In the short term, sir, there is going to be friction between the

asari and all the other races. If they are treated like how my ancestors were treated for creating the Geth." Reegar started.

"These Council races seem to enjoy a liberal application of, as the humans say, 'guilty by association'." Rtas commented.

"Quite so." Thel agreed. "So this, revelation, will turn the others against the asari then?" He held up a hand when Kal was about to answer. "I do not expect them to be treated the same as your ancestors were. I recognize the asari have, no insult intended, far more prestige and apparent worth than your ancestors had."

Kal nodded his agreement to the Arbiter's words, feeling pleasantly surprised that the Arbiter had recognized that fact on his own, though felt somewhat stupid as he based his assumption that the Arbiter would be like the few politicians he had met in his life: only seeing what lay right before them, and nothing more.

"Long term will the asari be forced to leave their Council?" Volo Durgan asked, sounding pleased by the thought of the blue aliens suffering such a misfortune.

"Probably not, the asari built the Council and have helped shape and define it over the centuries. What will probably happen is that they will feel compelled to more openly oppose humanity and human influence to prove their loyalty to the other Council Races." Kal'Reegar admitted. "If they do not, they will be kept on the Council but their influence among their peers will diminish."

"That begs the question then." Rtas intoned, "The asari who was a part of this, she must have known of what would happen."

"Not necessarily, every race has their fools and dupes." Durgan said one could deny the aged Sangheili's point. Stupidity and naivety seemed to be a universal aspect, no matter what the species.

"How will the humans react to this? can we expect more ONI trickery?" The Arbiter asked his advisors, or more specifically, Serana Ke'dar. Wanting to hear in particular from those who, like him, had a great deal of experience dealing directly with humans.

"I, don't think that we can expect much action from them, milord." Serana had served as a double-agent for the New Covenant since before she had been recruited by Doctor Denton. Relaying back as much information as she could to High Charity. While it may have stopped only a few of ONI's plots, it had given them far more valuable information as well. It was how they had learned of all of ONI's stations in their territory. "Nothing that we need be concerned about. They will likely try to use this to their advantage, an attempt to use the biological relation to promote better relations. Even perhaps a Republic/UEG Alliance. "

"That would be...bad, sir; the asari Republics are probably the richest nation in the galaxy and they have more industrialized worlds than anybody else in Council space. A real alliance with them would make humanity much much stronger." Kal'Reegar told the sangheili leader. He didn't think such an alliance was a real possibility but he felt compelled to bring it up. Continuing, he added, "But I doubt that would ever happen: the asari are too cautious and the humans are

far too treacherous by Citadel standards. Still, if we ever see such an alliance taking shape, it would be in our best interest to sabotage it by whatever means necessary."

While Thel agreed as he listened, it all came back to a single point for him "Whatever the reasoning behind their relation may be," Thel said before it could continue, "It is of very little importance. It does not make them Reclaimers like those of Erde-Tyrene." Using the Forerunner name of the human homeworld. "As of right now, there is little reason to believe such a threat is possible, or that one even currently exists. Until that time comes, we shall set aside this discussion, and focus on other matters."

"Speaking of which milord: one of our patrol fleets near the Terminus systems have intercepted a radio transmission. It appears to have been relayed through a number of sources, and it is impossible to tell who it had been." Kal mentioned. "The shipmaster mentioned that he had seen some human vessels in the area at the time of the interception and believes they have been the ones to relay it."

"Does the shipmaster have reason, outside of his own personal beliefs, for such an implication?" Thel all but demanded, not wanting for this meeting to be the start of blaming the humans for any and all events.

"His reasons were the information itself, my Arbiter." Kal answered, trying to get used to the honorific his 'peers' as it were, favored using. "That the information gathered could only have been obtained by the Office of Naval Intelligence." He trailed off, biting his tongue so as not to say anything unnecessary.

Thel however, sensed the quarian's slight unrest still. "You feel as though the shipmaster is wrong? That there is someone else equally as capable of collecting this information?"

"Yes, si-Yes, my Arbiter." Kal admitted. "There is an information broker in the Terminus systems, a gatherer, purchaser and seller of information, known only by their alias: the Shadow Broker. I've reviewed the information and it could have been collected by the Shadow Broker as well."

"And just how effective is this 'Shadow Broker' then?" Rtas asked. "If they are a private party, their abilities and resources can not match that of any true nation's."

"Regarding anyone else, I would agree with you. But not when it comes to the Shadow Broker." Kal began to argue. "The Shadow Broker's network is reported to be so expansive, that they have access to virtually every source of information in Citadel space. Even within the Council nations. When information or intelligence was needed, the Shadow Broker was, is, without peer."

"Why would the Council nations allow such an obvious threat to operate in their territory?" The Arbiter asked in confusion, for the Covenant, Old or New, would never have allowed an independent operator within their own empire to become so powerful.

"Because there is nothing they can do." Kal replied grimly. "Aside from the Council's inability to exercise absolute authority over

their citizens, the Shadow Broker has taken great pains to protect themselves. The Shadow Broker works through a network of intermediaries. Their location, identity or even species is unknown. The only things that are known about him, or them I suppose, are what they are potentially capable of, their infamy and little else."

"So the Council governments are weak then." Thel concluded. Kal nodded, as would have almost all quarians. After seeing the level of authority the Arbiter possessed and exercised over their own people, along with their military power, the Citadel Council seemed pathetic in comparison.

"But still strong enough to be a threat." the disagreeable Volo said. "They are like the Unggoy; individually they are weak and feeble, but collectively, they can be formidable in a fight."

Many of those present nodded in agreement, some recalling the history of the Unggoy Rebellion, which was only put down with the partial glassing of Balaho, the Unggoy homeworld. Thel simply smiled at his quarian advisor, while he personally believed that it was likely the humans, Reegar was still not blinded by animosity towards the humans, and so could still see other possibilities. "Still, let us review this information, whatever the source may be."

An holographic projection soon appeared just before them, a great globe so that all those present could see the same images. "This was the first piece of information that was found from the intercepted data packet." Kal began, as he was controlling the projection.

An image of a truly odd world appeared before them all. Half the planet appeared to be frozen while the other half was a burning inferno. Words beneath the holo-image identified the world as Crematoria, though for almost all present, this meant little to them except as another Hegemony held world, and an incredibly inhospitable world at that. Then the recording showed the few dwellings, small city, on the planet being destroyed from orbit, as Hegemony naval vessels rained destruction on those unfortunate enough to live on the surface.

No one present gaped or was shocked by the devastation, as they had all seen, done and ordered worse with the glassing of entire planets during their long lives in many campaigns.

"Why do you show us this?" Rtas asked. "There is little of surprise here, unless you are showing us the power of a new weapon the Hegemony may have in their possession. Even then, there is little to be concerned."

Kal openly gaped beneath his mask at how they had all dismissed the damage done to the world, not believing how they could do so easily. He quickly composed himself however, "This is the world of Crematoria, a strange planet that served as a valuable mining colony for the batarians. Owned and operated by the Batarian Mining Consortium, and run by legions of slaves. The living conditions were appalling even by the Hegemony's own awful standards. It was one of their primary sources of raw ores and minerals." Taking a breathe, he added. "It was also the first world that has declared themselves to be independent from the Hegemony in its entire history. The slaves that worked the mines had led an uprising and successfully revolted and took the colony."

"Past tense." Rtas pointed out.

"Yes, the Hegemony responded to the revolt by destroying everything from orbit. The information packet revealed mentioned their own communications show the the batarian military never had any intention of fighting the rebels to retake the colony." Kal'Reegar informed them. "Though admittedly, the actually communications were not attached in the packet data."

"Cowards." Rtas replied with disgust.

"Not necessarily, Sir. The packet also held another broadcast. This one of the rebels publicly announcing that they would destroy the colony before surrendering it to the Hegemony. And that they welcomed a batarian invasion force, because it would give them a chance to kill more of their oppressors before the end." the quarian explained. "If you wish to listen to the broadcast itself, I have submitted it to the database."

"So they knew they were doomed." Thel thought aloud, a note of respect in his voice. "They faced certain death, and yet stood tall. Respectable."

"From the rumors I've heard about Crematoria, being sent there was already considered a death sentence. The rebels probably thought that they had nothing to lose by revolting." Kal'Reegar replied, his disgust for the brutal system obvious even to aliens as unfamiliar with his kind as the Arbiter's other in his tone and his body language.

"Prior to their...annihilation, the rebels had managed to broadcast a message; proclaiming Crematoria as the FIRST free batarian republic. And they were calling on several governments to recognize their sovereignty and aid them against the Hegemony. They specifically asked all of the major powers: the Turian Hierarchy, Asari Republics, the United Earth Government, Salarian Union, Krogan Empire, and the New Covenant." the quarian continued, hoping that this audience could take the news as rationally as his own people would, circumstances having forced the quarians to take a very pragmatic approach to foreign affairs for centuries.

Instead, their reaction utterly shocked him. They started laughing, but it wasn't a joyous laugh. No, it was snideful and demeaning. Kal got his explanation as Volo began speaking. "What naivety! They truly thought that we would recognize their sovereignty, simply for usurping their masters on a single world." His laughter having died down by this point, as had the others. Now sneering, he added, "They must not realize that we only recognize our enemies when they have earned our respect. Perhaps if they usurp the entire Hegemony, then we shall recognize them."

"Still Arbiter, we must demonstrate our strength. WHEN are we going to invade the Veil and destroy the quarians rebellious machines!" Volo Durgan demanded to know. He wasn't a very zealous supporter of the quarians, not by any means. Rather, he was sick of the weak image that he, and many of his generation felt was being projected by the New Covenant. Compared to when they were at their height, he felt that they were only a shade of their former self. Now that they had regained some of their former strength, he wanted to show the humans

that they were rising up again, and the growing strength of the New Covenant to the Citadel Council.

Kal'Reegar felt conflicted. He wanted to encourage the New Covenant to begin their campaign against the Geth ASAP, moreover he knew that many of his own people, including some of the admirals, felt the same way. But the former quarian also thought that their forces weren't ready for a war. And one lesson that had been drilled into his head over and over again as a soldier was, never start a fight that you can't finish.

"Peace, Volo. Do not think that we, that I, have forgotten the promise made to the quarians to reclaim their world for both them and our Covenant." Thel spoke calmly, but anyone could easily pick out the threat undertoning the words spoken. Volo bowed his head in submission. Disagreeable and stubborn as he was, the bitter old warrior knew better than to defy the Arbiter directly. Seeing his advisor's submission, Thel continued. "It is far too early for us to act, to see if these Rebels are indeed worthy of our recognition, or to reclaim a homeworld. Let us not again repeat the mistakes of charging headlong like an unblooded warrior in his first battle, like we once did with the humans. But with a cool head, wizened from both mistakes and experience."

"As you decree, My Arbiter." Everyone, including Kal'Reegar chorused. Though the galaxy did not know it yet, it was now only a matter of time before the New Covenant would show that they were strong, once again.

**APUFMK*8

"To be honest Tya, I think this is good news. Now that humanity and the asari know were related, it gives us a reason to put aside our differences." Matriarch Benezia told her bondmate Matriarch Aethyta.

"You're being naive, Nezzie. The humans did pretty much nothing but fight each other before they met other intelligent life." Aethyta said cynically. "They've as much said so themselves before, remember?"

"I am sure the accounts of their history that they gave us were heavily censored." Benezia replied.

"Which means the truth is probably even worse." The other matriarch pointed out.

Benezia just sighed at her bondmate's pessimism. They had been bonded for almost thirty years when they had had their first child, Liara. Another fifty years after that, they had their second child, Tia. While she did indeed love her bondmate with all her heart, times like this often made her wonder what she had seen in Aethyta in the first place.

"Tya, I love you and respect your decision, but why are you so adamant against giving the humans a chance? Or giving the galaxy a chance at peace?" Benezia pleaded. "Do you want the children, our children, to grow up when the galaxy is at war?"

Aethyta sighed and rubbed her face. Suddenly glad that they were

having this conversation through the extranet instead of face to face. Admitting to the mother of her children, "Even if the humans DON'T take anymore aggressive action, it doesn't matter. The turians want revenge for Impera, and the Republics will probably get dragged along with them. Besides, now we have to worry about the Covenant Races too. I'm sorry, love, but the days when we could rely on diplomacy for everything are over. We need to be strong to discourage any would-be attackers if nothing else."

"You say that you want peace, Aethyta." Benezia's tone raising with her anger, "But your actions say differently. If you really wanted peace, you would be agreeing with me and doing everything to support me. Instead you're supporting that warmonger of a Council! I pray to the Goddess, Aethyta, that you see reason soon. Before your work tears our family apart."

"They destroyed one of our worlds, Nezzie, and their special forces are trying to overthrow an Associate Race's government. We HAVE to do something, otherwise the other Council Races will force us to! You have no idea just how much the turians HATE them and the krogan are getting just as bad." Aethyta replied, hating the note of pleading she heard in her own voice.

"A nation that spits in the face of everything we stand for. Slavery! Aristocracy! An oppressive government!" Benezia shot back. "The humans are only doing what the Council should have done centuries ago, when they first discovered the Batarians. Instead we allowed it to fester and grow like an infection in an open wound."

"I am sorry for interrupting your call, matriarch. But a VIP is demanding to see you." Aethyta's assistant informed her as she entered the Security Advisor's office.

The matriarch had actually asked that nobody disturb her unless it was an emergency. But she wanted an excuse to end the call before the argument with her bondmate got any worse. So she shot her assistant a grateful look as she told Benezia, "I'm sorry Nezzie but I have to take this now give Liara and Tia my love."

Then the matriarch hung up, taking a minute to compose herself before asking the asari maiden "So who is demanding to see me anyway?"

The maiden seemed to be trying to stay calm, but her apparent excitement was leaking through and breaking the facade easily. "It's uh, well uh..." A face-splitting grin was plastered on her face, excited giggles breaking through as she tried to speak.

Aethyta, getting tired of her assistant, demanded, "Spit it out, kid! Who is it that has you so damn excited?"

"Its a Justicar! THE Justicar Taiba! She's here!" the maiden replied brightly. Overjoyed at the chance to meet one of her heroes. Thinking that her friends would be so jealous. Assuming that the Justicar coming had to be good thing.

Whereas Aethyta's thoughts were going in a very different direction. Although she was a saint compared to the recently deceased Vendula, Aethyta had lived a wild life as a maiden. Doing quite a few things that she wasn't exactly proud of, some that were morally dubious at best. She was scared by the notion that the Justicar had come to

judge her.

A voice shocked her out of her thoughts. "Security Advisor Aethyta, I presume?" The matriarch blinked owlishly as her senses returned to her, with her eyes spotting the Justicar directly before her. Or rather, towering over her. Justicar Taiba was tall, freakishly so, by asari standards. She actually as tall as many krogan, taller in many cases. _In fact,_ Aethyta blankly thought, _she's as tall as those human 'Spartans'. _Though you would only realize that when you saw her in person or something to compare her to. Taiba was certainly not fat, nor was she especially muscular, all her proportions were more or less normal for an asari. Her entire body simply seemed to be built one size category bigger than normal. Her face was stoic, pretty, and unscarred, but the Justicar's hands were covered in old scar tissue.

'_Perhaps she prefers unarmed combat?' _Aethyta mentally shook her head, ridding herself of such useless thoughts. "Yes, I'm Aethyta. What can I do for the Justicars today? It would be an honor to aid the Justicars in whatever capacity I am able."

To Aethyta's shock the Justicar actually smiled and said politely, "The honor is mine matriarch. I am here to inform you that the Order approves of your Initiative and we wish to help."

Aethyta's eyes shot open. The Justicars, while they did all in their power to fight against that which went against their code, only aided others through circumstances. Getting directly involved in politics was completely out of character for them. At least it had been, until the asari met the humans.

"How...how so, Justicar?" Aethyta asked cautiously.

"While the Republics have become weak and decadent without the guiding hands of the Justicar Order, Matriarch Abene does not believe they are beyond redemption. We understand the work you do, and that there are corrupt individuals who impede such progress that must be dealt with." Taiba explained with a fierce look.

"You're offering to kill my political enemies" the matriarch exclaimed in shock.

"You misunderstand. We will not kill the innocent, no matter what opinions they hold. But we realize that some the wicked hide amongst those who impede the Asari's return to power, and so my Order is duty bound to eliminate them." The tall Justicar replied with a fierce look. "My Order will be however, reliant on you and your allies to inform us of who these...individuals are."

The matriarch now realized that regardless of how the Justicars phrased it, or even thought about it, they _**were**_ offering to kill her political enemies in order to advance their own agenda. Countless ambitious asari throughout history would have been overjoyed at such an opportunity. But instead Aethyta felt afraid, not for herself, but for her family.

Because she now knew that, much like herself, the Justicar Order was pursuing a political agenda centered on militarizing the Asari Republics. And that they were perfectly willing to kill any who would stand in the way of that goal, not just their political enemies.

Unfortunately, one of the most prominent and influential voices against asari militarization was Benezia T'Soni.

Aethyta, putting on a stoic facade, bowed her head. "Thank you, Justicar. I am grateful for this aid."

Justicar Taiba simply nodded before turning on her heel and leaving, Aethyta hearing her assistant all but jumping onto the Justicar as soon as she walked through. As soon as the door closed, Aethyta slumped into her chair, her arms slack. "Goddessâ€|.what am I going to do?"

****APUFMK****

The most famous couple living on the Hierarchy colony of Jarum was easily Rayna Cardiga and Michael Smith. Thanks to their recent press conference on Common Ancestry, which was being still being broadcasted throughout the galaxy, their faces were plastered on virtually every extranet browser from here to the Terminus.

In the wake of the press conference (and all the free publicity it had brought), donations to their clinic had more than doubled. Giving Rayna and Michael enough funds to hire other full time employees. In fact, with other doctors working at the clinic now Smith and Cardiga suddenly found themselves with a lot of free time on their hands. As a result, they had asked a friend to babysit their girls for the night, so that they could enjoy a romantic evening at home.

What they hadn't counted on was the press. Reporters of all races were constantly ringing the doorbells of their modest house, aiming cameras at all their windows in order to catch them on film, and even looking through their trash.

"Why won't they leave us alone Mike?" Rayna asked her lover as the doorbell rang again, appearing on the verge of tears.

"That's what the media does. They don't care about what they do and how it might affect us." Mike answered as he held her close. "They just want a story, something to plaster on the front page, something to make their name be heard."

"But a lot of what they're saying has NOTHING to do with Common Ancestry. They're saying such awful things about our family, appearance, and even our sex lives." Rayna replied, hurt and offended by the way that so many in the media were openly speculating about their lives. "Don't they have any decency!"

"And that's what they want. It doesn't matter what they write about, as long as people want to read it."

"I WISH we had never even done that press conference now, that we had just leaked our research anonymously to the extranet." Rayna complained.

"And what then?" He asked. "No one would have taken the information seriously, it would have been seen as a human ploy. To try and turn the galaxy against the asari. And even then, if it was taken seriously, they probably would have found out who we were."

"Maybe one of our friends has some idea how to handle this." Rayna

replied, more out of desperation than any real expectation that any of their friends could actually help with a problem this big and unusual.

"Maybe, maybe." Though if Mike was being honest with himself, he wasn't entirely sure if anyone could do anything. He had some ideas sure, to keep the paparazzi away, but they all needed money and wouldn't be effective for long anyway. And even with all the donations as of late their funds were all too limited. "Hopefully, they-"

"Oi! Get the hell out of here you damn parasites! Shoo! Or I'll Throw you to the other side of the colony!" The shouting was loud enough that it apparently had silenced the paparazzi outside into the silence, then chaos erupted again, this time focused on whoever was shouting.

'_No, I think I know who those people are.' _Mike thought to himself. When he started to hear people shouting and the occasional scream, he thought, '_Correction, I __**don't**_ _know who those people are.'_ It sounded as though one or two people had actually been thrown from the crowd. Not with biotics, but physically thrown.

"Let me in!" a familiar voice said, as the doorbell rang again. The couple recognizing the woman who had knocked Rayna down the day they went public. Rayna and Michael also the woman's asari companion with her. Both of them throwing venomous looks at the reporters waited outside the front door. Katya was cracking her knuckles, and judging by the wary looks they were giving her, chances were that she had been the one, if she had, throwing them.

"Oh thank god!" Janice said as she all but barged into the room, Katya following soon after, but not before giving one last glare before the doors shut. "Sorry for barging in, but we were out when you called us. I thought you might have needed help." Glancing towards the door she added, "Guess I was right."

"But what you can do?" Michael asked with a helpless shrug.

"Even if you punched them all, they would just come back later AND probably sue you for assault." the normally pacifistic doctor continued, the reporters behavior making him more upset than anything that had happened since his wife abandoned him and their young daughter.

"Well I could help you move to Omega." Katya suggested, "If any reporters were crazy enough to follow you, they won't last long." She was using her 'backstory' as an asari that had been born in the Terminus, and had left the lawless regions relatively recently.

Both doctors gaped at the suggestion as Janice chided her, "Katya! What are you thinking!? Omega of all places!?"

The 'asari' just shrugged. "You got a better idea?"

"I do, actually." Janice looked towards the doctors. "I've got a few friends working in a PR, Public Relations, Firm. Pretty high up actually." Seeing the couple's wide eyes, and about to protest, she added. "It's not like a news company or anything! They just help companies when they have issues with the press. I could probably

convince them to help you pro bono, or least for a lower rate."

"But we're just doctors, not celebrities!" Rayna protested.

Katya just shook her head at her 'fellow' asari's denial. Her face was plastered on every screen between her and the Citadel. Her name was now known by virtually every asari and possibly every human, at least amongst those that paid any attention to the news or current events. Her part in the work had immortalized in her in history, and yet she ***still*** thought that she wasn't a celebrity. Deciding to shatter that naivety, she snarked, "Of course you are. You're just as well known as, if not more, Councilor Tevos herself."

"It wasn't meant to be about us. We were simply telling the galaxy something that everybody needed to know, hopefully lowering the chances of the UNSC and the Council going to war again in the future." Michael said sadly.

"And you didn't expect that everyone would want to know about the people that made such a discovery?" Katya pointed out, practically disgusted by the naivety.

"To be honest, we assumed that bigger names in the medical and diplomatic world would take hold of the issue and seize all the glory for themselves. We certainly had no intention of fighting anybody for it." Michael admitted.

"Then you should have just given it to one of those 'people'." Katya was still surprised as how naive they were being. "This is the consequences of your action. And you might as well enjoy the peace that you still have."

Michael and Rayna shared a look. In retrospect what Katya was saying seemed obvious. But it hadn't occurred to them because they were idealists, rather than schemers, by nature. However, they were still intelligent people. Intelligent and humble enough to see when they were completely out of their depth.

"What do you think we should do?" Rayna asked her 'fellow' asari.

"If you don't plan on moving to Omega," The pair shuddered at the thought, "Then you might as well ask Janice's friends for help and hope they can do something."

Michael took Rayna's hand and gave her a meaningful look. Recognizing the signal from her lover, Cardiga initiated a brief Meld with Michael, sharing her thoughts and feelings with the man who was her spouse in all but name. Her eyes momentarily turning black, then she gave Michael a kiss, to show her acceptance and agreement.

"We'll do it." Rayna told Janice. The ONI agent smiled, the loving couple totally unaware that this had been ONI's plan all along, and they had engineered everything after the announcement, it had been no coincidence that the press had found Cardiga and Smith's house so quickly.

APUFMKII

Silence dominated the Rebel Headquarters. Almost all present utterly shocked beyond word and emotion by what they had learned. "By the Goddess...how could they do something like this?" Cara managed to whisper, her throat completely dry. She was glad that the two young ones were not awake, sleeping soundly back in her and Jella's quarters.

Similar whispers began break through the silence, yet it did not take long for those whispers to die away yet again. Even the Spartans themselves were unusually quiet. Since the new ones had shown up, the Rebels rarely had a moment where they did not hear a Spartan's voice. Whether they be berating, training, discussing strategy or simply talking with someone. The silence from the human super-soldiers was frightening for them.

Unknown to them, the Spartans were having a silent conversation, their external speakers shutdown and internal comms activated.

"So. That's it then." Mike's usually arrogant and joking tone was gone from his words. "Permission to finally stop pussy-footing around, sir?" Since the beginning of Operation Spartacus, the Spartan-IVs involved had been giving it their all, the Spartan-IIs had been holding back considerably. The latter had been given strict orders to limit their performances. Under the pretense of; "allowing the Rebellion to grow of its experience and actions, rather than being carried on the backs of the Spartans." In theory, if the entirety of the Spartan-IIs had been deployed, with little restrictions on how to end the Hegemony, the aristocratic nation could have been brought to its knees already.

That was not to say contingencies had not been put in place. ONI had also added in their orders that should the Batarian Hegemony escalate their actions, then the Spartans had permission as well. Up to and including total carte blanche.

"Permission denied." John's tone brooked no argument. "While the Hegemony have escalated their actions, they have not completely crossed the line, not yet at any rate." As though sensing what the others were about to say, he added, "That does not mean we will let this stand."

"Understood, sir." Mike didn't bother arguing, as he had a feeling what the Spartan Captain-Commander had in mind. That, and he rather avoid another dressing-down from his 'sister'.

"Does the news about the asari affect the mission, sir?" Jai asked the Spartan Captain-Commander. Voicing the thoughts of many of the younger Spartans. Who took it for granted that the human involvement in the revelation of the asari's relation to humanity meant ONI involvement. When 117 didn't respond, Jai asked again.

"Negative. The mission remains the same." 117 answered, though admittedly, that was only because he was being professional about it. John, as were the other Spartans present had been shocked as much as the Rebels, though they had hidden it far better. On a personal level though...he wasn't sure how to respond, so he was just setting it aside from now. Setting those thoughts aside, he 'focused' on 058. "Linda, you scouted the city, you learn of any good locations?"

"More than a few." The red-headed femme-fatale answered, "These Batarians have sloppy security, worse than the First Insurrection. I've started setting up nests for later." Linda-058 had been spending the majority of her time scouting out the city they were based in and several ones nearby. Searching for places where she could be most effectively provided _extreme _long range support. "Don't look now, John, but I think one of them wants to talk with you."

John saw that Linda was right and Jella was approaching him. He turned on his external speakers and depolarized his visor as she got closer. "Korrigan, are you going to be okay?" While he wasn't the best when dealing with people, he could still recognize stress and distress, even more easily in this situation having gotten used to the batarian woman's mannerisms and behavior.

"I, uh. Yeah, I think I'm going to be okay." She answered, though she seemed to be shaken. "Just not often you hear that an entire colony was turned into a radioactive crater."

"The shock of it will pass with time. How are the others handling it?" He asked, at the same time, peeking over her head and at said others. "You think they'll be fine?"

"They're in shock. Even for the Hegemony this is...brutal. Everybody expected the military to fight and bleed to recapture Crematoria. That WAS the plan after all." Jella explained.

"Try not to take it as badly, but this is actually a good sign." John tried to assuage. "Remember, everyone that went was prepared to die. You didn't order them to their deaths, they marched towards it willingly."

"Yes but they were SUPPOSED to get a chance to hurt the Hegemony. To make the fuckers suffer for every inch of ground that they took, instead the assholes just blew up everything from the comfort of orbit." Korrigan practically growled.

"And it also means the Hegemony is taking us seriously." John pointed out. "Before they treated us as uppant slaves, then gangs and after, as real guerillas. But they never truly considered us a threat. The fact that they were willing to use an exorbitant amount of ordinance to destroy such a small target means that the Hegemony now sees the Rebellion as a real threat. And they are afraid." John was partially lying between his teeth on that last part, as he wasn't really sure if they were afraid, simply trying to send a message, or both. But Jella needed some comforting words right now, however true they may or may not be. Not that she would ever know of that, not from him.

"So what if they're angry or afraid or whatever! if they start destroying everything we take at the end, all we'll have is a smoldering wreck and an EMPIRE of corpses." Jella shot back.

Oddly enough, her crude statement showed the character growth that Korrigan had gone through since John first met her. She would have once gladly sacrificed her own life, and the lives of everyone around her, just to severely hurt the Hegemony. But thanks to factors like her relationship with Cara, and to a lesser extent John himself, Jella had come to genuinely care about her followers.

The Spartan felt somewhat, strange. Proud, he guessed one could call it, of how she changed. Ironic, since he never thought he would feel that way about a non-human. "And they will pay dearly for it, Jella Korragan. They will. This Rebellion has perhaps gone on for long enough." Jella stepped back, a hand falling on her sidearm, misinterpreting the Spartan's words. Unperturbed, he continued. "It is time to come out of the shadows."

"You mean to destroy the President and the Senate...now?" Jella said slowly in amazement.

The rebel leader had fantasized about bringing justice, or at least vengeance, down upon the leaders of the Hegemony for as long as she could remember. But until today it had been little more than wishful thinking. What John Doe was saying suddenly made it seem far more real.

The Spartan nodded. "Cut off the snake's head, and the body will die. But if we do this, you have two options. Let me and my Spartans handle this, or launch an assault on the capitol building. But if you launch the assault, there will be casualties. Far more than we have seen so far, barring Crematoria. It's your decision." Almost as though an afterthought, he added, "You have three days to make your decision. If you have not by then, my Spartans and I will go it alone."

Jella Korragan's initial reaction was to defiantly reject the idea that her followers wouldn't participate. That they would not take part in the mission to stab the heart of the Hegemony was inconceivable. But as she saw Cara in the corner of her eye, Jella reconsidered. Imagining all the people in the room who looked up to her, trusted her, and believed in her, dead.

"I will think about it." Jella said coolly.

John just nodded in understanding. "It is not an easy thing to commit oneself to such a course. But remember this Korragan, that in a war, there are always casualties. What matters is if this: were those lives spent, or were they wasted?" With that said, John polarized his visor and walked away, his Spartans leaving with him.

"I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve."

-Isoroku Yamamoto, after the Attack on Pearl Harbor-

Author's Note (aDarkOne):

So the Rebellion is finally heating up. As many of you have been asking for, but don't praise us yet. I do not believe in Character Shields, so ANYBODY in this crossover can die.

I figure we will have succeeded if most readers are either very pleased or pissed off by the way that we finish the Batarian Civil War story arc. Because the worst reaction a writer can get is indifference.

Follower38: Yeah, we more or less have made it that the asari, sans biotics at least, creations by First Ascension Humanity. Yeah, I know, there is canon for that, but personally, I don't see the

Protheans as having completely engineered the asari from scratch. Adding on, yes, but from scratch, I have my doubts. Thankfully, this is a fanfiction so that gives me and aDarkOne the liberty of throwing certain aspects of canon out the proverbial window.

Please, leave us a review.

29. Civil War: Aim for the Heart

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk. II

Chapter 29

Civil War: Aim for the Heart

The Office of Naval Intelligence wasn't supposed to be political. Theoretically it existed just to provide the UNSC with the intelligence it needed to function properly. But since it had been founded, ONI had taken on, often at its own initiative, many responsibilities.

While it had been interfering in alien politics, specifically that of the New Covenant's, for quite some time, and the UEG's for even longer, it was now exploring a new facet of foreign relations it never had before: Propaganda aimed specifically at non-humans.

Section II had always handled propaganda affairs within UNSC/UEG space, especially during the Great War. It had been their decision to make the existence of the Spartans public as well. Then it had followed up extraterrestrial affairs, but that was minor in comparison. Now, ONI as a whole, was attempting something that required the cooperation of two of ONI's Four Divisions.

Several days prior to offering aid to the Kissing Cousins, the somewhat patronizing nickname the media had given Rayna Cardiga and Michael Smith, the senior leadership of ONI was already debating how best to use the couple, within the most secure room of their headquarters on Earth.

"-precursor race all but certainly interfered in one, perhaps both species' evolution. But before you ask, it is impossible, for us at least, to tell if the DNA was taken from the asari, and implanted into humanity, or the other way around." Anything else said after was suddenly muted, even as the video continued to play.

"Soâ€|" Paragonosky began, "They've finally gone public with the confirmation of a relationship between humanity and the asari." Glancing towards her senior officers present, she was not disappointed, seeing that few were surprised by the fact.

"I ALWAYS thought it was too much of a coincidence they looked like blue women." Ned Rich muttered to the universe at large.

"Regardless of how obvious it seems in retrospect, we have to deal with this revelation now. What do you intend to do admiral?" Gibson asked as he stared coolly at Parangosky. "We're already stretching ourselves thin as it is. Rich is still trying to acquire funds for other projects. Since Hood's crackdown, we only have so much to go around."

"For Section III, that may be true. But not for all of ONI." The aged woman countered. "It is why I have called for a joint meeting with our Section II counterparts." A relatively unknown fact about ONI was that despite whatever animosity the various divisions, Sections 0 through 3 may have with each other, they would all keep the other's secrets, barring the overwatch division of Section 0 of course. Whether that was out of respect or threat, no one knew. It was just how it had been since ONI had first been established. "Rear-Admiral Dalia has a proposal that I think we will all find acceptable."

The Rear-Admiral in question rose and saluted her superior. "Thank you, ma'am." Relaxing the salute, she turned to the rest. "The Revelation, as it has come to be called, is the first POSITIVE publicity humanity has gotten since that fiasco with that rapist on Jarum. And I believe that we can further exploit it to alter humanity's perceived image amongst the Council races." Dalia Artmova said confidently.

"Who cares what aliens think?" A Section II officer replied disdainfully. "Our duty is to focus on our people, we don't need to convince the aliens of anything if we have the biggest guns."

"And you are incredibly ignorant if you have already forgotten how the Great War taught us that we can't afford to ignore what other spacefaring races think of us." Dalia argued.

"And you, Captain, should remember of how we should not fall to our own propaganda." Sarak Ackerson, daughter of the Late Colonel Ackerson, and Director of ONI Section II, chastised her officer. "And should any of you have forgotten, our perception by the Covenant was the only thing that saved our entire race from extinction!" The captain who had spoken out, now sufficiently cowed, slumped in his chair. "Now, then, rear-admiral, your Director said that you had a proposal to share?"

"Yes, I believe that we should make the Doctors Smith and Cardiga the centerpiece of our outreach to the asari. At the very least, we must convince the asari that we are distant relations with whom to reach out and connect to. Rather than the daemons that hamstrunged their navy while kidnapping their leaders, among...other incidents..." Dalia continued. An uncomfortable silence descending on the group, as everybody there was reminded of the fact that Artmova was one of the people most responsible for the tensions between the Council Races and the UNSC as whole.

"You have a point, the asari DO have the biggest economy amongst the Council races, and possibly the greater galaxy. Establishing firm trade relations with them would help in bolstering and stabilizing the economy to a pre-First Insurrection state." An admiral from the Section II group admitted.

"And the more business we can direct towards humanity, or least away from their turian and krogan allies, the better. I'd like to see them try to fund their vast war machine without help from their bankers." Ned Rich said with an evil chuckle. "The turians and krogan might have their own economies but what they're bankrolling right now? They're probably in massive debt right now unless the asari are propping them up."

"This may not be true anymore...but the data we have now conclusively proves that it was mainly due to under the table aid from the Asari Republics that the Turian Hierarchy DIDN'T go into major recession in the immediate aftermath of their war with us." Ned added, having been constantly reviewing any and all information that came in regarding the economies of their enemies.

"What about all the 'reparations' we sent the bird-brains?." Habboi asked in surprise. "I didn't pay much attention but the amount that we sent...I think it would have been enough to build a CSO, maybe two."

"We didn't send the first shipment of raw materials to Jarum until over a month after the war. The turian economy could have easily collapsed by then without asari help." Ned explained. "With all the ships that they built before we started sending the raw goods, not to mention all the reconstruction they were forced to do, and they even started on several shipyards as well. Trust me, the money they spent, if we had the same amount, we could have built two INFs and their escorts."

"Back to the topic at hand," Ackerson's words drawing everyone's attention to her, "Just how do you propose of this 'exploitation', Dalia?" She asked. "While my Division's speciality may be propaganda, we aren't so foolish as to dive in without some sort of plan. My predecessor learned that the hard way during the Great War."

"We exploit the Kissing Cousins celebrity for all its worth making them the poster boys for promoting human/asari relations. They're almost ideal for it already: Michael Smith is a doctor and humanitarian whose dedicated his life to helping the less fortunate and so is Rayna Cardiga. I admit that there are plenty of more photogenic humans and asari out there but honestly I think the fact that they're not ridiculously good looking is a plus too it makes the couple seem less threatening and more genuine." Dalia carefully explained, having put a lot of thought what she was going to say. "The first step would be to offer them aid through one of our more legitimate fronts. I have several in-"

She stopped seeing the Section II Director raise her palm, signaling her to stop. "Enough, your proposal has been accepted, however," Ackerson shifted her attention to her Section III counterpart, "I hope you don't mind sharing your officers?"

Paragonsky simply smirked and nodded. "You may, now there is more to be discussed, however, this is beyond Section II's jurisdiction."

Ackerson almost told Parangosky what she thought of the old woman's rude dismissal, but then her own common sense prevailed. After all, she had no intention of going to an early grave like her father. So she and her entourage quietly left the room. Leaving Parangosky with her, more or less, trusted subordinates.

"What is the status of our operations in New Covenant territory?" Parangosky asked her people, seeing no need to beat around the bush.

"So far they've been leaving us alone." Habboi answered. "Our listening stations and intercept posts have remained unmolested for

the most part, excluding the occasional independent action. Least, the replacements are." Since the New Covenant's unveiling of their new weapon, and Lord Hood's own actions, Section III had lost much of their intelligence gathering locations, resources and people behind New Covenant borders. While they did scuttle some of them as ordered, many more were left intact, but converted into remote stations, meant exclusively for listening in on Covenant transmissions. "There's been some...disturbing intel actually, quite recently."

"What do you mean, disturbing intel?" Osmin pressed. "Anything about the Covenant can be considered disturbing."

"Yes, it generally is, but this is different." Habboi argued. "My agents have deciphered several transmissions, and they report that the New Covenant is about to launch an invasion." Seeing the fear in his fellow officers, quickly added, "Not against the UNSC, but into the region known as the Perseus Veil. But that's not the disturbing part. What is, is that based on the intercepts, the New Covenant fleet is now considerably larger than what our projections predicted. Almost twenty percent larger."

The declaration snagged everyone's attention, as it meant several things. The first was that it meant the Covenant was recovering far, far faster than they had predicted or planned for. Which didn't make sense. While they knew to an extent that the quarians had allied, perhaps even joined, the New Covenant, that influx alone would not account for the discrepancy. Especially not in regards to resources.

"Do we know of how this happened?" Osmin asked. "I can only assume that it is because of your inept agents that this has managed to go unnoticed."

"Do not think to insult my people, Osmin." Habboi growled, reining in his anger lest he angered the dragon by insulting her protege. "They have not been slacking, but having to work with our new boundaries has crippled my efforts to learn of what happens in Covenant borders. Not to mention that since the quarians' arrival, they seemed to have learned from their mistakes."

Osmin scoffed, but held back her tongue seeing her mentor give her a look. Turning back to her officer in charge of operations in Covenant space, the Section III Director asked, "Any theories as to the reason behind this invasion? Along with any suggested courses of action?"

"In regards as to the why for this invasion, I believe there are a number, but the primary reasons are twofold. The first is to fully integrate the quarians into their society." The inquisitive looks of his fellows prompted him to elaborate. "The quarians, whether they are allied or joined with the Covenant, are not yet fully integrated into their society. An invasion of the Perseus Veil and taking back of their homeworld would permanently solidify any relations between the two parties."

"And the other?"

"Field-testing. They have a new fleet, and more than certainly, a number of new designs ready to be battle-tested. This war against the Geth, the Artificial Intelligence race that has terrified the Citadel

Council for centuries, is a perfect opportunity to do so."

"As for my suggested course of action:" he continued, "Just observe. We can not do anything; either against the Covenant or for the Geth. For the former, we lack the ability to do so without a full-fledged war. For the latter, if the Covenant were to ever learn of our aid, then they would surely turn on us immediately. And even if that were not the case, we have no means of contacting the Geth."

"That's it?" Osmin snidely asked, "You would have us sitting our asses and twiddling our thumbs? I think you've lost your gu-"

"Serin, quiet." Paragonosky ordered. "These interruptions of yours and apparent desire for conflict will be discussed later, but he is correct. It is best to simply observe. Develop strategies and tactics for when they inevitably turn on us. I will leave the specifics to you." Habboi nodded in acceptance. "Are there any other issues?"

"What if the Geth win?" Dalia said boldly.

"Impossible, the Geth have the same tech base as the Council Races." Rich argued. "I've studied the history of their part of the galaxy, and technology is almost uniform across the board."

"So what? It's been more than three centuries since the Geth kicked out the quarians and nobody knows what a civilization of A.I.s would do if left to their own devices. they could have technology light-years more advanced than ours now or a fleet so massive that it makes combined forces of humanity, the Council Races, the Covenant Races look like a small task force." Dalia countered. "We simply can not make assumptions, at the risk that they be wrong."

"That is why we shall merely observe this conflict...if the Covenant Races wipe out a group that would become an enemy or rival to humanity we win and if the Geth somehow defeat the Covenant, we win." Admiral Parangosky declared. "That issue aside, there is still one thing left to be discussed.

"Spartacus is proceeding well...although I worry that the rebels are overreaching." Rear-Admiral Richard Ksman reported. As Operation Spartacus had grown, he had been one of those in charge of watching over it until ultimately he was given total responsibility of operations in not just Hegemony Space but parts of the Terminus as well. "The latest dead-drop has outlined plans to decapitate the Hegemony's leadership in a single strike. The Spartans are directly involved in the plan's creation."

"But are the rebels in any position to takeover the Hegemony? If the Hegemony collapses and the rebels don't seize control, won't the Council Races just try to move in and take control?"

"No, they are not." The Rear-Admiral answered. "But the information given through the dead-drops all indicate that this is, almost literally, their only option."

"You can not be serious." Rich asked. "We spent blood Spartans to assist these people. What the hell could the Hegemony be doing against them that even Spartans can't handle."

"Base Delta Zero." There was a sharp intake of breath by those present. The UNSC had a number of codes for certain, extreme scenarios. Such as Code Hydra, for imminent threats from biological weapons of mass destruction, and Bandersnatch, for imminent threats from energy-based weapons of mass destruction. Base Delta Zero was code for total obliteration of settlements via conventional means with a nuclear finisher.

No one bothered asking if this had been confirmed. Spartans almost never delivered faulty intelligence.

"But we're fighting them IN the Hegemony! are you telling me that those four-eyed freaks are deliberately destroying their own cities just to kill rebels?" Dalia shouted.

"It seems that they've stopped caring about such frivolous concerns." Richard answered. "It hasn't been a single incident either. While there has been only one Base Delta Zero, there have been several significant smaller, but similar incidents throughout the Hegemony."

"And the Rebels have been forced to respond in kind, before the Hegemony breaks their back." Osmin muttered. "If the Hegemony continues to respond like this, it leaves only three options for the Rebellion, first, they are either broken or destroyed by Hegemony and the Rebellion is dead. Or they launch their own offense against the Hegemony." Richards nodded at the accurate summarization.

"They must cut off the head of the snake." Richards said, "Any fallout can be dealt with thereafter."

"But is this really a good idea?" Everyone's head turned towards Dalia, who had spoken. "The Hegemony has been in existence for even longer than humanity has been in space. If we force them into a corner, their backs against the proverbial walls, we cannot accurately predict how they will react."

"We beat the Insurrectionists and this is the same kind of war." Osmin said aggressively.

"But the Batarian Hegemony ISN'T a bunch of human terrorists, its an entire regime and culture that's been around much much longer than the UNSC. In that time it could have easily built fleets, armies, mega-weapons and a sorts of other things to bring out in an emergency. It's idiotic, and all too likely lethal, for our people on the ground to underestimate it." Dalia continued.

"But what are our options then?" Osmin all but demanded. when Dalia could give no answer, Osmin added, "If this is how much things have escalated, then perhaps it is time to bring down the Hegemony. There are still the regional governors so that will buy the Rebellion time to build infrastructure. And there is little to be worried about. The Hegemony for all it's noise and flare, is little more than a paper tiger."

There was a general consensus among most present. While even now a few of them had privately held doubts about Operation Spartacus, none of them shared Dalia's concerns. Certain that the Batarian Hegemony was a weak and corrupt institution, and that they only had to kick in

the door to make the whole rotten structure come crashing down.

****APUFMKII****

There was probably no other leader in Citadel territory happier about the recent revelation concerning humanity and the asari than High Admiral Datak Korra. The high admiral was too much of a proud pragmatist let the fact that humans and asari were 'cousins' change his opinion of either species. But he knew that most people weren't so pragmatic.

He realized how he could manipulate the situation to his advantage. The Asari Republics, since the Revelation, had already stated that they would be increasing their aid to the Hegemony, increasing the originally planned forces more than twentyfold. All in an effort to prove how the Republics were not sympathetic, much less in league, with the UNSC.

The High Admiral already had plans as to how he would best utilize _his _new forces. Spartan Hunter-Killer squads. Of all the forces under or allied with the Hegemony, only the Asari Commandos had any real success that didn't require luck, prototype weapons or an excessive amount of ordinance. As was the case with the _**one **_confirmed Spartan death that the Hegemony had. The first major engagement with the Spartans, in the sewers with the initial commando group had almost resulted in the Spartan's death, were it not for the untimely arrival of the other Rebels.

In all likelihood, the Commandos would lose a significant fraction of their forces sent here, but that was to be expected as there was little less that could be done about that. But in the meantime, it would allow his regular and elite forces, along with what was left of the turian, salarian and krogan forces to direct all their efforts on the actual Rebels themselves, rather than their Spartan allies. With any luck, the Spartans would be too preoccupied with the Commando HK teams to worry about about their native allies.

Which such pleasant thoughts running through his mind, Admiral Korra contacted Doctor Enid Arash to check on the status of Project Golgatha. Offering a rare smile as the doctor promptly answered, her image appearing on his screen.

"Greetings Doctor, I would like a status report on Golgatha."

"Status report?" She asked, "Well depends on what you want by that. You want the good news, or you want the bad news first? Because I got plenty of both."

"The bad news." Korra said, his good mood already fading fast thanks to having to deal with the disrespectful doctor.

"Well I've got a couple of working solutions, but all of them bad. The best one I got, and really the only good one of them all, will be killing your men within a few years at best, a few months at worst."

"Explain." the admiral coldly ordered.

"We've got a new alloy substance to augment their bones and bodies, hardens and strengthens them to be almost unbreakable. But the stuff is radioactive. And the more active the people are with the augments, the more radiation gets released and the faster it kills them." She raised a hand before the Admiral could speak, "And no, I couldn't figure out a different method. Whatever the humans did to create a ceramic coating, I can't figure out. Everything else I tried blocked off the bone from everything else. No intake or output."

"Unacceptable! find another way, use as many test subjects as you have to." Korra angrily answered.

"Well you'll have to wait, oh say, another decade or two." Arash flippantly replied. "I'm having the time of my life with all these subjects but even I can't do miracles." She shrugged.

"I am not sacrificing loyal batarian soldiers on the altar of YOUR bad science! either figure out a way to make it work or I'll find somebody who can!" Datak demanded. When the Doctor began another snarky reply he simply hung up on her.

The horrible truth was, that there was nobody working for the Hegemony more qualified than Enid Arash for this kind of work. The fact that she was one of the few geniuses working in Hegemony R&D was the only reason she got away with frequently disrespecting and disobeying her superiors. Behavior that would have gotten virtually anybody else in the Hegemony severely punished.

'But I can't just throw away the lives of loyal soldiers' the admiral thought. For as ruthless as Korra was, he still felt loyalty towards the troops under his command. Remembering when he had been a low ranking soldier on the front lines. Risking life and limb for the Hegemony. He recalled the differences in opinion among his fellow troopers of the various commanders during that time. Those who fought alongside them and treated them as more than cannon fodder were extolled and respected, while many wanted to put a bullet in those who saw them as little more than disposable assets. In fact, he had seen that happen. Many officer deaths were chalked up as 'stray rounds'.

Such dark thoughts were interrupted by a message from the Senate. Summoning the High Admiral before the 'august' body to explain his recent actions. Korra was surprised that the politicians had found the nerve to do such a thing. Considering the fact that he controlled a large number of them through intimidation, bribery, or blackmail.

Nevertheless, he did still technically answer to them, and Datak Korra respected the institution of the Senate, even if he had nothing but contempt for most of the actual senators. Unfortunately his underground headquarters was isolated enough that it would be difficult to make it to the meeting on time. But the senators were just politicians, so the Korra doubted the delay would make much difference.

****APUFMKII****

The National Security Committee was the most powerful committee in the Grand Senate of the Batarian Hegemony. Because it was responsible

for determining the funding that the military got every year. It also appointed the High Admiral of the Navy, who was effectively in charge of all military forces in the Hegemony. The National Security Committee also had the authority to fire the High Admiral, in cases of gross incompetence or treason, although that power had only been used twice in the history of the Hegemony. But the Committee was considering using it a third time.

As far as many senators were concerned, Datak Korra had stepped over the line when he destroyed an entire batarian colony without authorization. Depriving the people and corporations of the Hegemony of the many raw materials that Crematoria regularly exported. Including the Batarian Mining Consortium itself, which was outraged by what the High Admiral had done to its facility on Crematoria, and had bought the loyalty of even more senators than Korra himself.

"Korra's gone too far this time." Senator Chara Korus, the chairman of the National Security Committee said as he paced the large conference room where the committee itself and other senators who shared their concerns about the High Admiral were currently meeting.

They were not meeting in the Senate itself, Korra had too much influence there. Both through the senators still 'loyal' to him and the security for the Senate building, which was provided by the military. Instead the high admiral had been summoned to Korus's private mansion just outside the capital. A large and extremely well fortified building guarded by security forces that answered directly to the chairman.

But since the mansion was so close to Overseer City and designed to keep guests in luxurious comfort the chairman and the rest of the committee often met there. Sometimes even for official business, which was technically against senate rules, but the senators were willing to bend those rules for their own convenience and comfort. Which made the summons directed at the high admiral look less suspicious.

"I have to agree." Melic Scopus added, "The sheer amount of funding all of his 'operations' and 'projects' are demanding are taking a not inconsiderable toll on the treasury, let alone the budget." Melic was the committee member in charge of maintaining its finances and by extension, the treasury itself. Every request for funds was funneled through him, and more often than not, he had to allow whatever requests the High Admiral made, whatever his opinions were. "If this keeps up, coupled with the slave trade being shut down, the Hegemony will be in debt within decades."

"Despite all of the good business that this 'war' of his has given me." Felia Soro said, she was one of the few women in the committee, along with being the CEO of Batarian State Arms, the primary and practically sole, producer of arms and armor for the entire Hegemony. Making her one of the most powerful women in the Hegemony. "I have to agree with Melic. Eventually, Korra will stamp out this Rebellion, and peace is never good for my business."

"That's if the UNSC does not come in and interfere directly, rather than skirting around in the shadows." Senator Dormius, who was considered somewhat paranoid by his colleagues, interjected. "With

the methodology that Datak is dealing with the Rebellion, I wouldn't be surprised if the UNSC is planning an actual invasion into our territory to save their allies."

"Which is why we are ending his idiotic 'crusade', and his reign tonight." Chara reminded them. "With him out of the way, we may be able to reach an accord, perhaps even a truce with these Rebels. And by extension, that may open up a chance for more...amiable relations with the UNSC."

"The UNSC will try to make it as enticing as possible for us to break away from the Council." Dormius openly speculated.

"While the Council will offer all they can to keep us allied with them." Felia finished.

"Precisely." the chairman replied with a smile. Imagining all the possibilities that would open up once Datak Korra was gone.

Unfortunately the High Admiral had been in power for a very long time, and many senior officers as well as rank and file soldiers were more loyal to him than the Hegemony as a whole. The committee had the legal authority to remove him from power, but many senators were leery of their ability to actually take power from him if Korra resisted. Therefore for the good of the Hegemony, and their own welfare, the senators gathered at this meeting had decided to 'permanently' retire the admiral.

****APUFMKII****

To the ignorance of the conspirators, their lives were already in the hands of another. On a rooftop far from the mansion itself, cross-hairs tracked their every move as Spartan Linda-058 watched them through her scope.

Guards and committee members alike were tagged on her HUD as she 'looked' through walls and glass. On the ground, closer to the mansion, John and the other Rebels were gathering. Multiple outlines appearing on John's HUD and those who had them as Linda marked them.

John clicked on his comm. "Everyone in position?" A small flurry of affirmatives was his answer, along with a silent status flash by Linda. The Spartan-Sniper was in what was called her 'Zen-state'. A state of mind where all there was for her was her rifle, the target and nothing else. The Peak of her operation.

This operation had been planned at the last minute, when they intercepted a communique. It detailed a meeting where the Committee and Datak Korra, or 'The Butcher' as he had become to be called by the Rebels, would be together, along with the time and location. The Spartans had been searching for an opportunity to take out the High Admiral since the Operation began, but he was always out of their reach. This was the first, and perhaps only, opportunity they would have to take him down. The fact that the NSC committee members would be there was just an added bonus.

When Jella had been informed of this, she had been adamant that the Rebels would be involved as well. No matter how many casualties they

would suffer, or ordinance they would have to use, the Rebels were going to be involved, and they were going to kill the Butcher.

They had pulled out all the stops for this, codenamed Operation: Guillotine. Even Gray Team, who was doing what they were doing best. John clicked his comm again, "Gray Team, Jai, what's your progress?"

"We're inside. All objectives secured." Jai responded. Their orders had been to infiltrate the mansion and take out several of the higher-ranking senior officers present. The ones who would coordinate the entire security force if they were attacked. Without them, the security forces would, temporarily, be in disarray as someone tried to take command, with squads and platoons acting independently rather than as part of a single unit.

"Understood." John shut down the comms, just in time for Jella to come up behind him. "Everyone ready?"

"Yeah." The Rebel leader answered. She had brought fifty of her top people with her for this operation. Rebels with a great deal of combat experience and ferocity, though of course none of them could match a Spartan. Nevertheless, if the numbers alone would help. But John noticed a surprisingly absence.

"You didn't bring Cara along?"

"Noâ€|she needs to watch the kids." Jella said with unusual defensiveness. In truth, the rebel leader simply didn't want to bring her lover along due to the fact that she thought there would be heavy casualties. Unable to stomach the thought that the asari maiden would be amongst them.

"Understandable." The Spartan responded, taking the answer for what it sounded. He never really understood the nuances of the homestead, despite all of his new experiences since becoming the Spartan's Captain-Commander. After all, the Spartan-II's never expected to have an 'off-duty' life, as it were.

Radioing Linda again, he spoke only three words.

Back on the rooftop, Linda heard John's words. "Take, take, take." She picked her target, an officer sticking out of an APC. Her breathing slowed to less than a crawl, the cross-hairs steadied, settling on her target's chest. And she _squeezedâ€|_

As pin struck primer, linear rails charged. The 20mm projectile rocketed forward, thrust forward even faster as magnetic rails discharged.

Across the distance, the officer saw a brief flash in the distance. Then, eternal darkness. The 20mm Armor-piercing Fin-Stabilized Discarding Sabot round vaporized the hapless officer, piercing the other APC behind him, soon exploding in spectacular fashion.

Finally, the shockwave arrived. One after the other, six sonic booms shattered glass and pummeled bodies.

The security forces froze in disbelief. Not comprehending what they

had just seen and felt. Then, they heard the roar. Several snapped out of their stupor, only to be shocked yet again by the sight before them, the rebels seemed to simply appear near the estate's front gate, screaming in defiance as they charged the defenders.

The security guards by the gate tried to rally, but any of them who appeared to be on the verge of taking command of the situation were quickly taken out by the Spartan sniper. They still managed to shoot down dozens of the rebels though, who charging straight at the guards, not bothering with cover or any other tactics beyond drowning them in bullets and bodies. Then the wave hit, as the rebels reached the guards, shooting, stabbing, and in a few cases literally ripping apart the outnumbered guards.

John was at the head of the carnage, using the distraction provided by the charging rebels to its full extent. Focused on clearing out and capturing as many Hegemony vehicles as possible for the Rebels to use later. Even as he dodged the weapons fire from friend and foe alike. A grim smile crept on his face as he saw several of the security forces scream in panic when the odd stream of familiar plasma bolts cut through the air and incinerated their targets. ONI had supplied the Rebels with a few captured Covenant plasma weapons, and they were doing a fantastic job against the Hegemony. The hot plasma cutting through grunts like a hot knife through butter.

John and several others looked up as they heard a familiar whining noise; Hegemony gunships had finally lifted off, and the whining they heard was their charge. Six gunships strafed the grounds, their chainguns tearing into Rebels and Security Forces alike, their gunners and pilots heedless of their targets, firing blindly into the melee.

As the gunships roared overhead, they began turning back around, intent on another gun-run. But even as their chainguns begin to spool up, the shattering sonic booms hammered the air again. Two of the gunships began to spiral out of control, grabbing the attention of all those present before they crashed down into the dirt below.

The remaining ships pulled up, thinking that something from below had taken out their fellow pilots. Only for two more to be shot down, thrusters cutting out in an instant before crashing down.

Far from the battlefield, Linda worked back the heavy bolt on her rifle, a smoking 20mm shell casing flew out from the weapon, clinking audibly as it hit the ground and joined the ever growing collection of pale-white shells scattered to her right. Lifting the massive weapon ever so much, she pulled out the massive drum magazine, tossing it join two others beside her. A cylinder ejected out from the center as the heat sink attempted to cool enough.

Even as she was pulling another magazine from the pack attached to her armor, she glanced at the rangefinder on the scope. There, clear as day, it read 3.9 kilometers. Even for her, this was extreme range shooting. Under normal circumstances, this would have been pushing her to the brink of her ability. But with this rifle, this L2 REX 'Last Light', it felt like she was firing at less than half that distance! Finally slotting the fresh mag, she slammed the bolt forward, sending a fresh round home, the scope linking with her HUD and giving her a crystal-clear view.

Even at this distance, she could see the battlefield as though she were there in person. She scanned the carnage searching for a single individual, locking in once she had found him. John. He was still alive, uninjured. For some reason she couldn't comprehend, that comforted her. That comfort was shot to pieces as John bolted from her view, only for the dirt to fly up as bullets filled the space where he had been.

A strange feeling flashed through Linda, at seeing someone trying to kill John. Scarcely did the gunship have a chance to try again before a single shot ripped through the cockpit, Linda working the bolt with blinding speed, the shots vaporizing the entire cockpit and then some. The gunship lights aflame right before crashing into a Hegemony tank and turning them both to a raging fireball.

Back on the battlefield, John is nearly dumbfounded, as that was incredible marksmanship, even for Linda, taking out two targets with one round. "Thanks for the cover, Linda. Prioritize any potential evacuation vehicles, do not let the HVTs escape." This time, instead of a comm. response, a screeching noise could be heard. Looking up, John saw a dropship flying erratically, moments later, a set of sonic-booms ripped through the area. He smiled at the sight.

"Gray team, what's your position?"

****APUFMKII****

"Clearing a path to you, sir!" Jai replied as he cut down another four soldiers as they tried to take the Spartan down, their faces shredded by 7.62 high velocity rounds. "Mike, focus fire on those APCs!"

"Already on it!" Mike shouldered the M200 Rapier, the smart-scope already linking with his HUD even as he did so. As the large reticle superimposed itself over his first target, a Hegemony made APC, Mike spammed the trigger five times. The Spartan's feet visibly digging into the dirt as the shoulder-fired recoil operated cannon bucked from the recoil. 65mm shells screamed across the air, racing towards their target.

The first round slammed against the kinetic barrier, flattening on impact even as the kinetic barriers exploded in a flurry of sparks, pinging against the armor. The three remaining rounds ripped through the armor, the first burying itself deep within the engine, the other two finding their way into the crew compartment, ricocheting with lethal velocity, perforating the crew. The fifth and final round cleanly missing the target, the recoil having knocked the Spartan's aim off.

Seeing their comrade knocked out of action, the remaining two vehicles, both IFVs, searched for the assailant. Hatches popped open as crew men stepped up and took control of the turrets, locking onto the Spartan and firing even as their quarry displaced.

Mike ejected the spent magazine, reaching for another on his hip when the main cannons fired, the shells exploding and throwing dirt and debris into the air. "Too slow, you four-eyed bastards!" He slammed the fresh mag in, charged the bolt and fired, emptying the gun. Each IFV took 2 rounds each, but the kinetic barriers held against the barrage, being far stronger than their APC 'cousins'. "Ah shit." Mike

muttered as the cannons fired again, except the Spartan couldn't dodge these shots.

The area around the Spartan exploded, dirt and smoke obscuring the sight. The Hegemony gunners cheered, thinking that they had killed one of the vaunted 'super-soldiers'. Only for both vehicles to be utterly gutted as a hyper-velocity shell pierced them both, exploding as it hit the ground on the other side.

Adriana approached the site, loading a fresh slug into her ARC-920. "Mike, you okay?"

The smoke and dirt finally began to settle, a blue ethereal glow emanating from within. "Yeah, I'm fine. Armor-lock saved my ass." The glow faded as he released the lock. "Almost got me there."

"Yeah, well that'll teach you not to be cocky from now on." Jai chastised his squad-mate and 'brother'. "Sir, sector is secured. All hostiles down."

"Copy that." John's voice piping through their comms. "Make sure that no one escapes the area. Lock it down. The Rebels are mopping up here as well."

****APUFMKII****

Back with John, the Rebels were killing all remaining security personnel. Even those who tried to surrender found a bullet between their eyes, as the Rebels were not inclined on taking any prisoners, especially not after Crematoria. Even if they weren't, they didn't have time.

"John, we got a few squads mopping up the survivors." Jella reported, weapons firing coming from over the comm. "A few are taking over the intact vehicles, thanks for that. The rest are ready to breach the mansion."

"Do you have enough?"

"We took less casualties than we expected, thanks to you and your friends." She answered, "But it'd nice if we could get you to help too."

"Understood."

****APUFMKKII****

For all the precautions that the Committee chairman had taken to make the mansion as impenetrable as possible; checkpoints, pressure doors, auto-defenses and elite infantry, they did little to stop the Rebels. Plasma charges blowing the doors apart as though they were made of cardboard, and even elite forces would fall to sheer numbers and excessive firepower. The presence of the Spartans was just overkill.

Breaching the mansion and clearing a path straight to their targets proved easier than assaulting the grounds, and it wasn't long before John, Jella and the others found themselves at the final pressure door.

"You ready for this?" John asked, even as he was priming the breaching charge.

Jella, who was bloodied, though John wasn't sure if the blood was hers or someone else's, exhausted and looked as though she was about to collapse, replied, "Oh, definitely." The excitement in her voice not betraying just how exhausted she was.

"Get ready then." John stepped back and planted himself against the wall next to the door. "Breach charge set. Clear!" The shaped charge poured plasma directly into the door, superheating to extremes before the secondary charge exploded, explosively ejecting the now liquified door into the room beyond. Concussion and stun grenades were thrown into the breach, shockwaves, blinding light and piercing noise deafening those inside who weren't dead already. "Go, go, go!"

The Rebels funneled through the breach, tackling anyone who remained standing to the ground, those already down suddenly finding a foot on their backs and slamming them back onto the floor as they tried to rise.

"WHERE'S HIGH ADMIRAL KORRA!" Jella demanded to know, wanting to make sure that she got to kill 'The Butcher' personally.

Not everyone reacts the prospect of their own rapidly impending death the same way, and the terrified chairman found himself laughing at the absurdity of the situation. If the rebels had waited a few hours to launch their assault Korra would already be dead (killed while 'resisting arrest' once the senators stripped him of his position and ordered him imprisoned). Instead the rebels had probably saved Korra's life by taking down the politicians intent on murdering him.

His terror giving him a weird sort of false bravado, Senator Chara Korus pointed at the rebel leader and said "you're early you stupid bitch he's not here yet."

Jella Korrigan replied by shooting the chairman down, Chara's four eyes widening in pain and surprise as his blood was sprayed over his horrified colleagues. Without Jella even being aware of the fact that she had just murdered what was probably the second or third most powerful person in the Hegemony. Not that it mattered, she would have gladly killed him just for being a Hegemony official.

"NO, PLEASE I'M THE HEAD OF BATARIAN STATE ARMS! I CAN GIVE YOU WHATEVER YOU WANT!" Felia Soro begged. The senator who had made several fortunes selling death dealing tools to the military, and saw violent conflict as a source of profit, suddenly finding warfare much more objectionable when her own life was on the line. Shivering and whimpering as blood she had gotten splashed with ran down her clothes.

But she received the same measure of mercy she had usually given. None, crying out briefly as Jella gunned her down. The rest of the also opening fire moments later. Killing the elite of the Hegemony's political establishment with glee. Finally bringing justice, or at least vengeance, down upon those that had oppressed them for so long.

John and the other Spartans watched impassively as all those present

were summarily executed without even a 'by-your-leave'. This had been the plan after all. Normally the Spartans had issues against civilian targets, but this was an assassination mission after all. And the Spartans didn't exactly label the people here as civilians, they didn't deserve that luxury.

Even if that weren't the case, it had been a given since the start of Spartacus that virtually all leaders of the old guard would have to be eliminated. Letting even one of these people survive would have risked the eventual Batarian Republic becoming just like its predecessor.

John scanned the faces of the now dead, least those who still had them, identifying each of the bodies by one means or the other. A list of the side of his HUD crossing out names and faces as he found them. The 'List' as it had come to be called among the Rebels, was a virtual 'who's who' of people within the Hegemony hierarchy. The list kept growing increasingly shorter and shorter. Then, it stopped.

A dozen or so names were left on the list. Most of them relatively minor compared to those lying dead on the floor, but two of them stuck out. Datak Korra and Zolak Kol. They had never received any sort of confirmation whether or not if the Hegemony President was supposed to be at this meeting or not, but all signs had strongly suggested that both the Admiral and the President would be here. But they had launched this attack specifically to ELIMINATE the President, or at least the High Admiral.

Which meant that the both Hegemony's head of state and their top military official were still alive. And now in the wake of these high level assassinations, the Citadel Council and the Hegemony's own remaining political establishment would surely give President Kol carte blanche to crush the Rebellion without ANY restraints. After all, who would openly speak out against any measure to quell 'terrorist's and 'insurrectionists' , when said individuals had just executed over half of the Hegemony's ruling body.

Although she lacked John's training or experience, Jella was in her own way very shrewd, with an eye for the main objective. The batarian female and male Spartan turned towards each other, both of them thinking and speaking at the same time, "We need to find Kol, now."

****APUFMKII****

For the briefest of moments High Admiral Datak Korra simply stares at his screen in shock as he reads of the massacre that occurred at Senator Chara Korus's fortified mansion. Although Korra was a cold-blooded pragmatist most of the time, he was also a dedicated nationalist. Believing in the strength and power of the Hegemony. So hearing that the rebels had wiped out over half the senate was a terrible shock.

Although there were still dozens of surviving senators, who didn't attend the meeting, the Grand Senate didn't even have enough members left for an official session at this point. Until more Senators could be appointed or elected, the national legislature of the Hegemony was effectively dead. Of the Hegemony's national political establishment, only the Presidency itself still functioned.

He had sent a small contingent of his personal guard ahead as a vanguard to his arrival. Only for them to report the carnage and smoking ruin that was the mansion. Burning wrecks and bodies scattered the lawns, smoke billowing from various areas of the building itself. And judging by the fact that his vanguard had told him that the entire area hadn't been thoroughly looted meant only one thing, they were on the move. And considering how many had just died in this attack, and that they didn't know of his location, that left only one option.

Korra cursed as he hastily tried to open up a channel. "C'mon, c'mon, pick up you arrogant trash." He uttered as he waited, not realizing the irony of his statement.

President Zolak Kol's cringing aide answered the call. His falsely friendly voice annoying the admiral, who considered the man as nothing but a self-promoting worm licking the boots of a near useless politician. But President Kol was still the head of state of the Hegemony, so Korra considered it his duty to protect the man. He certainly refused to let the rebels have him.

After rudely dismissing the aide and demanding to see the president, Zolak Kol's fat features suddenly filled Korra's screen. The President's middle aged body bloated from a life of excess and self-indulgence. A far cry from the military discipline Datak had lived under for virtually his entire life.

"Yes, what do you want Korra? You want to turn another city into an irradiated wasteland? I'm still dealing with the paperwork from that little tantrum of yours." Despite whatever opinions the High Admiral may have had regarding the president, he was indeed a competent leader. The fact that he had managed to contain the political fallout from Crematoria saying volumes about his leadership ability. Though, the same could be said for his failing to handle the Rebellion as well.

"Sir, the rebels have just mounted a successful attack against the Senate and killed over half the senators they're probably going to attack you next so we need to get you to a secure location immediately" Korra said urgently, respecting the office if not the man himself.

"What are you blathering on about? How could that be possible? They can't have attacked so many homesteads so quickly, otherwise I would have heard about it." He demanded, he turned off-screen for a moment, ordering another of his aides to confirm what he had been told.

"The Chairman of the National Security Committee was holding another semi-official meeting of his allies in the senate at his mansion. The rebels must have learned of it somehow and decided to attack all those senators gathered together to one place outside the Grand Senate building and its defenses." Korra explained, omitting the fact that the meeting had been about his recent conduct fighting the Rebellion.

The President scowled as an aide whispered into his ear, most likely confirming Korra's report. "Damn those Rebels to the Pits! And you said that they're on their way here? To the Presidential Estate itself?" He demanded, "And how did you learn about this before I did?"

You're not even part of the NSC."

"I've been using everything intelligence asset I have for MONTHS to track down and eliminate the rebels sir...and I have been doing my best to coordinate my efforts with the Department of Information Control. Frankly I am disappointed that it took us THIS long to find out about it. The rebels must have blocked communications somehow during their attack otherwise we would have received the senators calls for help" Korra said

"Well they're growing far bolder or suicidal if they think they can take the palace." The President replied confidently. "I'll end this damn Rebellion with this battle. They will learn what it truly means to anger the Hegemony."

Korra felt like pounding his head against the wall. The man simply didn't seem to understand what they were facing. People ready, willing, and able to kill all the leaders of the Hegemony if given half a chance.

"Sir I urge you to evacuate to a secure location now. For all its defenses, the Presidential Palace is still a planet-based target that can still be attacked from the air or ground. You would be much safer aboard one of our warships or lunar bases" Datak said in almost pleading tones, trying to get his superior to see reason.

"And risk looking like a coward in front of not only the Hegemony but the Galaxy? Fleeing from a pack of ingrates and thugs? Not likely."

Korra was a silent for a moment. If security for the Presidential Palace was provided by the regular military, he might have just ordered his troops to take the president to a secure location off-planet, by force if necessary. But security at the palace was done by the Presidential Guard, an elite military unit responsible for the safety of the president and his top people that answered directly to the Hegemony's head of state.

Supposedly the Presidential Guard was composed of the best soldiers in the Hegemony. But Korra knew that many soldiers had gotten into the prestigious unit through connections or bribery more than raw ability. And that many of those soldiers hadn't been in any real combat for decades.

"Please sir I urge you to reconsider-" Korra began to say, only to be rudely interrupted by the President.

"Enough. You do what you have to, to end these Rebels, and I'll do mine." The call ended as connection was abruptly cut off.

Korra felt like screaming but he knew that he couldn't afford to lose control right now. Ordering all available units to converge on and defend the Presidential Palace against the expected attack. Contacting those in command of the krogan and turian forces on Kar'Shan and asking them to send all available forces to help him defend the Presidential Palace. Wishing that the President had simply had the sense to retreat to a secure bunker like the one Korra himself was currently in.

"If he won't take this seriously, then I'll have toâ€¦" Datak said to

himself, knowing that now circumstances might force him to do things that even the high admiral had considered previously unthinkable.

****APUFMKII****

The Presidential Palace was perhaps the most heavily guarded site on the batarian homeworld. The grounds of the Presidential Palace were surrounded by a large wall that covered all sides, while the building itself was surrounded by an inner wall protecting the palace from intruders. Hundreds of heavily armed soldiers patrolled the grounds at all times, supported by numerous tanks and lighter ground vehicles. Automated guns and security cameras seemed to be built into the wall every few feet, and there were many other defenses guarding the Presidential Palace hidden from view.

And more were on their way. Rebels posted in positions beyond the grounds were keeping watch on the roads, and were reporting that it seemed like an entire battalion of troops and armor were enroute. A battalion, at minimum that was a thousand fresh soldiers, with a lot of heavy support. So far it seemed like it was only the Hegemony, which was almost a blessing. That meant that the Council forces were either unaware of the situation, or trying to gather themselves. Either way, that was more time until the heavy hitters arrived.

The Rebels were throwing everything they had in this assault. Anyone who could reach the Palace or link up with the remainder of the Mansion assault force, along with every vehicle and heavy weapon in their arsenal. Including what they had they had managed to loot from the mansion, including APCs and IFVs. But still, it was a bloodbath.

Tanks were utterly shredding every vehicle the Rebels had with their massive dual cannons. Shells meant for enemy tanks blowing apart the Rebel vehicles as though they were nothing. One thing was sure, the Hegemony wasn't holding anything back in this fight.

"John, we need to get in there NOW...I intercepted transmissions between the batarian military and the turians and the goddamn bird-brains are sending forces to assist the defenders and it sounds like the fucking krogan probably will too" Linda reported. "I'm still displacing, so you're without support for another twenty-minutes."

"Understood, how long do we have?" the Spartan commander asked.

"Less than an hour." The sniper replied.

For the first time in his life, John was actually tempted to curse out loud. This battle, if it could be called that, was already bad enough as it was. They had underestimated the Presidential Guard in their haste, and the only reason the Rebels hadn't been routed was the Spartans themselves.

"Gray team, we've got a problem."

"So we heard." Jai replied, as he ripped off the hatch of an IFV and threw down a grenade. "We're taking out as many of these bastards as we can but-shit!" His HUD began wailing as his shields suddenly took

a massive hit, dropping them to less than a quarter strength. Turning to where the shot came from, Jai cursed again as he opened fire. "We've got more problems! It's not just the Palace guards, we've got mechs here too!"

Even as he spoke Xero Mechs were being rushed onto the battlefield. Just like the one that had taken down a Spartan in the Castle Facility. But with upgraded weapons, armor, and programming. Loaded up into Armored Personnel Carriers along with regular troops (cramming as many people in as possible) to reach the battle in time.

Even as Jai sprinted, John called him up again on the comm. "Where's 120?"

"Right here boss man, just taking out the big boys as fast as I can." The Spartan answered, even as he dive-rolled again to avoid another tank-shell before returning the favor with his Rapier. Empty shells and magazines scattered the area as he emptied clip after clip. The thick armor and powerful kinetic barriers meant that every tank needed an entire magazine before it was out of action.

A half-dozen tanks that were either smoldering ruin or utterly silent stood testament to Mike-120's skill with the weapon. "Don't worry, these four-eyed freaks can't touch me!" As though to prove his point, he sidestepped another rocket, before vaporizing the gutsy Hegemony soldier who had fired it at him.

"Don't get cocky, Mike!" Adriana chastised, even as she fired another hyper-sonic slug at an approaching APC, stopping it cold as it penetrated, killing the driver and ricocheting around inside. "Take out that last tank already!"

"Don't worry, I got this." He replied coolly. He leveled the Rapier again at the final surviving tank, the kinetic barriers already shattered from an earlier barrage, this final volley would end it, its treads nothing but tatters from rockets, stranding it. As though knowing the Spartan had it dead to rights, the tank crew went for broke, leveling both its cannons at the Spartan and fired.

Across from it, a Hegemony Palace guard ripped a missile launcher from the hands of a dead compatriot. The guard knew he was dead already, he was losing blood at an alarming rate but the Pillars would break before he died without a fight.

Entering the state referred to as 'Spartan Time' Mike used his implants to their utmost as he dodged the cannon fire. But that put him almost directly in the path of the missile fired by the dying batarian soldier. A touch of panic beginning to set in as the missile approached. Grunting with effort as he hurled himself away from the incoming missile at the last second. The explosion washed over the Spartan, bringing his shields down to only a sliver, his HUD blaring at the loss in protection. Mike's sense of relief rushing through him as his heavy form touched down on a seemingly ordinary patch of ground.

Hellfire erupted.

Right below Mike had been an Hegemony Class-V Anti-tank mine, meant to penetrate the thickest of armor. The MJOLNIR armor with a Spartan

weighed half a metric ton. More than enough to fool the mine into thinking a tank had just triggered it.

Heat and flame shot upward, metal and flesh soaring through the air by the force of the explosion. For a second, the battlefield seemed to still as every eye was glued to the Spartan as he flew through the air, rocketing towards a wall. A sickening _crunch_ was heard by the Spartans, the explosion muting the sound for everyone else.

For a moment, for the Spartans, time froze as they locked onto to their frozen teammate. Gray Team silently watching, praying for their brother to still be alive. But their HUDs told them everything.

Spartan Mike-120, was dead.

Then, all Hell broke loose.

Gray Team, for lack of a better term, began obliterating the Hegemonic Forces. There were no roars of anger, no screams of anguish from the Spartans; simply death incarnate.

Adriana began firing on anything that moved in front of her, her Railgun blowing targets apart as fast as she could reload it. When she ran out of slugs, she splattered batarian skulls against it as she ran by until it finally broke apart, picking up Hegemony weapons and opening fire until they overheated.

Jai though, Gray Team was considered the most 'unstable' of the Spartans, as they were relatively undisciplined, unruly and ruled by their emotions at times. Jai was particularly savage, the usually calm and collected soldier now gone. Using his enhanced strength and berserker rage to literally rip the arms off of batarian soldiers, beating their horrified comrades with their limbs, appearing like a demon in truth as he became totally drenched in his enemies' blood. A bloody spectre of death.

Among those that could, Rebels and Hegemony alike looked on in shock and horror, whispers among those not caught in the fighting, recoining an old term for the Spartans: "Demons."

But not all servants of the Hegemony were capable of fear. As the Spartans focused on slaughtering their mortal foes the Xero Mechs finally reached the battlefield. The relatively simple but powerful A.I.s that controlled them analyzing the human super soldiers. Scanning the 'demons' for weaknesses. Then immediately attacking once they had concluded what the optimum way to take down their enemies was.

An excess of overwhelming firepower.

Adriana was in the process of ripping another rifle from a Hegemony shoulder, arms with it, when the first of the shells struck. The solid-penetrator depleting her shields as it slammed into her midsection, flattening against her armor. It may not have penetrated, but it still had enough force to send the Spartan tumbling end over end. Ironically saving her life as a barrage of shells perforated where he had been moments before.

Jai however, wasn't so fortunate. The first shell striking his face

and taking down his shields and two more striking his head moments later. Literally decapitating the Spartan as the force of the strikes ripped his head off. His body staying upright for a second as blood sprayed out of his neck. Finally falling as his corpse seemed to realize it was dead.

John watched in disbelief. Two of his Spartans down in a single firefight, both of them within hours of each other. He couldn't believe it, but those feelings took a backseat as his instincts _screamed_ 'Get Down!'. Before he knew it, he was face first in the dirt, _feeling_ the supersonic shells as they went past. Getting to his feet, he tracked where the shots had come from, only to feel his blood run cold.

****APUFMKII****

XERO-unit Alpha-02 analyzed the battlefield, focusing on the biggest threats remaining; the three Spartans.

Correction, two Spartans. Focusing on the dead body, its robotic mind concluded, "Test firing of Type-34 Hyper-velocity shell successful. Effectiveness against primary targets: acceptable." Moving on, it locked on to the other Spartans. "Locking on to new targets. Firing."

****APUFMKII****

John recognized the machines for what they were, he had seen their predecessor after all, and ended it. But these, they looked far better than the prototype John had gutted. And he wasn't so sure about repeating that event.

"Jella, where are you!?" He shouted into the comms, even as he sprinted towards a dead IFV, trying to use it for cover. "We've got problems."

"HEADING TOWARDS THE FUCKING PRESIDENT!" Jella shouted, as she and rebels still alive and mobile, a definite minority, continued to run towards the Presidential Palace. Charging through the few Presidential Guard forces outside the building that were still on their feet. Many of the rebels and presidential protectors fighting so close together that they were firing at each other at point blank range. "YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN! I-" Jella's voice suddenly cut out, but judging by how there were still sounds of fighting, she was still alive.

"Adriana, what's your status?"

A grunt was his answer. "Three cracked ribs and one broken. Got my common sense back though."

"Can you fight?"

"Out of ammo for my ARC, sir." Gunfire came over the comms. "But I can still handle myself. I'm heading for the palace, but I can't stay here. You're on your own sir, sorry."

"Understood, I'll see you inside." He cut off the comm. channel, again sprinting as he did so, to another wrecked vehicle. He was running out of options. Linda wasn't an option, as she was still

moving most likely. And even if she wasn't, there wasn't a guarantee that she could aim at these things.

But his mechanical enemies had no such uncertainty or doubt. Slowly but surely coming closer and closer to the Spartans as they continued to fire at their enemies. John could see dozens of them in the distance, with more on the way. Fortunately, only about five were close enough to effectively fire on the Spartans yet. The rest still stomping towards them from the wrecks of their carriers. But the rest would get into effective combat range all too soon.

Something that John couldn't allow, as he searched the battlefield for options, his eyes landed on Mike's body, specifically his Rapier cannon. He clicked on his comm, broadcasting on all frequencies. "This is Spartan 117, to all Rebels in the area: I will be breaching the palace walls momentarily. Either evacuate the area or prepare to breach the palace! We have have enemy forces in-bound."

His orders given, John sprinted for Spartan-120. The XERO mechs locked on to the Spartan, their cannons firing as fast as they could cycle, trying to bring the Spartan Commander down. But Lady Luck favored the Spartan as she always did. Every shot narrowly missing the Spartan, sometimes by mere millimeters. Dirt exploding around him.

Approaching his fallen brother, John threw himself downwarding, sliding towards his target. He grabbed the Rapier as soon as it touched his fingers, bringing it to bear on his shoulders even as he got to his knees.

The XERO mechs tensed, ready to intercept whatever ordinance the Spartan was about to send their way. But that wasn't John's intent. He aimed past the mechs, and directly at the Palace itself. Unlike Jella and the others, he didn't see a door or other access ways into the Palace from his position. And trying to find one would give the XEROs time to close the distance. So he was going to make his own.

Three shells blazed through the air, blowing open a hole in the palace wall. The XEROs stopped for a moment, trying to understand the perceived waste of ordinance. But as the Spartan raced towards the hole, they realized what was going on. Diverting as much power to their legs as possible to reach the rebels before they could achieve their objective.

However, for all their mechanical might, the intelligent war machines had arrived on the battlefield too late. Jella and the others reached the outer ring of the palace and went inside just before the majority of the mechs reached optimum firing range. The Rebellion was literally assaulting the gates of the Presidential Palace itself now.

****APUFMKII****

Word of the Rebellion's recent victories had not yet reached the Citadel. Nevertheless human hostility was on everyone's minds. Other than the turian home system itself, no other place in their territory had been as rudely assaulted. Although the physical damage to the Citadel caused by humanity's ships and soldiers had been repaired years ago, the emotional trauma still lingered. Many of the Citadel's

finest citizens had lost homes, friends, or family members during the UNSC's kidnapping of the Council, and it would be a long time before they could begin to forget, let alone forgive. The scars from that day felt as fresh as today as they did when Impera died.

Now with the Revelation that Humanity and Asari were related on the genetic level, the repercussions were felt far and wide by the asari. Fear has the power to suppress logic and reason. And in people's minds, the Asari were, if not in league with humanity, than its allies. After all, family stands together, does it not?

The effect was somewhat subtle, at least so far. Ambassador Anita Goyle herself had noticed that few of the many soldiers and C-Sec personnel that followed her, whenever she left the human embassy, seemed to be asari these days. Presumably, both because their superiors were less likely to assign asari to that duty now, and also because few asari volunteered for such duty, as they did not want to be associated with humans in any way.

But the effects went beyond Anita's 'Security Escort'. Had the Ambassador been in the know of C-Sec politics, she would have learned of how many asari had been demoted or reassigned. Once proud beat cops that patrolled the streets now finding themselves doing little more than pushing papers and reading case files for cold cases. Assigned to the most menial of tasks despite their experience.

It was not isolated to C-Sec either.

For the richest and most powerful asari, whose wealth and influence largely protected them from the effects of public opinion, life remained good. But asari without such advantages suddenly found their lives harder. From the simple Asari waitresses who now were less likely to get tips, to blue skinned real estate agents that now found it harder to sell property, asari bureaucrats and academics now more likely to be ignored by their colleagues and superiors, and even asari strippers all too likely to get boos instead of catcalls in the current atmosphere.

All of this found their way to a certain Councilor's lap as many of the asari asked, if not outright begged, for her to help them. Many of them suspected that it was the Revelation as the cause for this new found treatment. But they were powerless to change people's opinions. Few were willing to listen to their pleas and arguments.

Even the leaders of the Asari Republics had noticed a change. As elected politicians they were keenly aware of public opinion. And noticed that it appeared to be turning against the asari people. Motivating them to show their rejection of human expansion publicly. Giving Councilor Tevos the free rein to do something that would have been unimaginable months ago.

Tevos turned to the other Councilors in their private dining room within the Citadel Tower. Not wanting to discuss of this publicly before telling her colleagues first, when the Councilors were all alone. Informing them, "After a great deal of thought the leaders of the Republics have agreed to send more commandos to Kar'Shan in order to root out the human terrorists there."

"And just how many of these 'commandos' will the Republics be

sending?" Cicero tapped his talons against the table. "You sent in a squad, and they were all wiped out in a single engagement. The Hierarchy has already dedicated an entire task force to the cause."

"The Republic of Thessia will be sending a hundred commandos within a week, with two hundred more commandos gathered from the other Republics joining them by the end of the month." Tevos replied firmly as she stared straight at the turian Councilor.

Cicero just glared back at Tevos, while he was glad that the what were considered the elite of elites in Council space would finally be dedicated en masse, it was the fact that it took so long that irked him.

"Well you can let them gather for a while longer then before you send them off." Wrex advised. "Since the CASTLE engagement, the Empire has been searching for its Battlemasters. We've found a few willing to fight the Rebels. But it'll take time to gather them." While that was the truth, it was only a half-truth. The Battlemasters willing to fight had already been gathered together, but Wrex was trying to simply delay their deployment.

Although he did not like the thought of a human-backed Batarian Nation and government, he was still hesitant about letting the current regime stand, or at least unchanged. He hoped that this bloody conflict would beat some humility into them at the very least.

"No, we must wipe out the insurrection now, before the situation in the Hegemony further deteriorates." Tevos replied. Which was actually true considering what was going on in the Hegemony at that very moment. But Tevos had no way of knowing that things on Kar'Shan had begun falling apart.

In truth she and the other asari leaders were motivated by political rather than strategic or military concerns. Wanting to be SEEN doing something to combat the human menace, even if that was the WRONG thing. Tevos just hoped that few of her people's own loyal warriors wouldn't have to die for such political expediency.

"But is it truly wise to send so many of elites, rather than some regular units?" Valdn suggested.

"What are you talking about?" Cicero pressed. "If you haven't realized, even our special forces are not enough to stand against Spartans without large numbers. How long do you think a regular platoon will last against them?"

"That we can agree on, but sending so many, are we showing our hand too soon?" The Salarian pointed out. "With this conflict, the humans have the opportunity to see how our elites operate, and devise counter-tactics and strategies. And the more we send, the more they will learn."

"They don't need to." Cicero said with a sigh as he remembered how humans forces had beat the Hierarchy over and over again both on the ground and in space during the brief Council/UNSC War.

Then he glared at the other Councilors as he said venomously, "I

would think that YOU of all people would remember that they were able to easily fight through our warrior elite when they took you off the Citadel. It is OUR special forces that need to learn their weaknesses, NOT the other way around."

There was a deathly silence in the room as Cicero critically brought up one of the most awful experiences in the lives of Tevos, Wrex, and Valdn. The salarian Councilor was completely silent and utterly still, which was a never a good sign when it came to Valdn. Whereas Wrex looked like he wanted to reach across the large table that they were all sitting at and throttle the turian. Finally Tevos spoke and said "We HAVE to send the commandos because although the Republics have other military forces, they are little more than heavily armed police and would be useless in an environment like the Hegemony."

Although the Asari Republics had once had a great military, they had always relied on their elite special forces and a relatively small number of very powerful warships to intimidate any would be attackers. But new circumstance meant that they could no longer do so. It wasn't just the human factor, their allies were well on the path to surpassing them in military strength. The turians already were fielding more warships than the asari had in the past several hundred years. If the Republics did not change their ways, they would soon be left behind, and no longer the strongest of the Council Races.

The conservative leaders of the asari had resisted this pressure for years. But it now appeared that they were giving in. Thessia had just announced that it was increasing its contribution to the Citadel Defense Fleet, and that its own shipyards were increasing military production, with several of the more prominent Republics making similar announcements.

As an afterthought Tevos added, "Despite however many of our elites we may lose in this conflict, I feel as though our victory is assured. With the backing of the Council, what hope do these Rebels have to stand against us?"

****APUFMKII****

A/N:

Follower 38.

Right, I can assume that several of you readers are extremely shocked and pissed by the fact that in the span of two back-to-back engagements, two Spartan-IIs are now dead. One by an AntiTank mine and the other by experimental weapons. Well before everyone gets mad and starts throwing theories and reasons at me, let me explain mine. First off, I wanted to prove that no one's death is off the board. Everyone has an equal chance of dying in this story. The Spartans, for all their advantages and power, are not invincible. As for Mike-120, he died because of sheer bad luck. While he did have Armor Lock, in my story, it is rated for everything short of Tank Shells, and two of them were coming straight at him. As for the mine, well unlike in Halo 3, these mines were actually hidden beneath the ground so they couldn't be seen. And as the explosives in the mine were meant for something with approximately twenty-times the amount of armor as the MJOLNIR. The armor triggered the mine due the mine only

requiring two things to be set off: presence of metal and a certain amount of weight on the trigger. As for Jai-006, he was in a berserker state, which meant he was not thinking clearly, along with the hyper-velocity round being just that powerful. As for the Berserker state, when seeing that you lost a 'brother' who survived two Insurrections, an attempted genocide by an alien race and an alien civil war, only to be killed by those thought to be 'lessers', I think even the most disciplined would break. John was the exception as he wasn't as close to Mike like the rest of Gray Team, who had been living with each other since Pre-augmentation in the Spartan-II Program.

Well, things are really ramping up now. And its only going to get worse from here on out.

Please review. :) I fully expect to lose people today from the fact that I killed Spartans.

aDarkOne here:

As I said before, anybody in this story can die (even Spartans). But that's not what I wanted to talk about. I wanted to tell you about a different elite warrior in this story.

Wrex.

I realize that he's acting more calculating and less straightforward than the canon one. But keep in mind that the Wrex in this setting has spent a long time playing politics on the Citadel. Whereas the one that fights besides Shepherd in the games spent the last few centuries as a mercenary.

Benezia and Aethyta aren't quite the same either, because they stayed together and had another kid. This is an alternate universe, so lots a of the characters are a little different (or very different) from their canon counterparts.

30. Civil War: First Twilight

Alternate Past: Uncertain Future Mk II

Chapter 30

Civil War: First Twilight

"By the Pillars, just how did this all go so wrong?" Datak Korra asked himself as he watched a live satellite feed of assault on the Presidential Palace. The Rebels had since breached the grounds and the inner walls. The Palace had been deemed to be nigh unbreachable

If the rebels fought like a regular military force, sweeping a clean path through their enemies as they advanced, Korra had no doubt that the combined Hegemony and turian forces rapidly heading towards their position could wipe the insurgents out (albeit with heavy losses thanks to the Spartan presence). But the rebels refused to fight that way. Instead they ran, blowing past most except those directly in their way, outracing most of the Palace defenders reinforcements as they made their way to their target at breakneck speed.

The High Admiral knew that if and when the rebels entered the Presidential Palace in force, it was all but assured that President Kol would be dead before the day's end. As would everyone else inside. And Korra could not allow that. He was not particularly attached to Kol himself, in truth, he despised the batarian, but as a loyal servant of the Hegemony allowing TRAITORS to kill the batarian head of state was utterly intolerable.

Even Korra admitted that the President deserved a far more dignified and respectable death than anything the Rebels would give him. They would almost assuredly broadcast images of their president, which would turn this battle, no matter how many losses the Rebels suffered, into their political victory. If that happened, the Rebels would be able to claim that no one in the Hegemony was safe from their reach, and the President's body would be irrefutable proof of that. Fear and panic would permeate the people of the Hegemony even more than it already had, as all began to wonder if they would be the next to be targeted next.

And almost any alternative was preferable to that. Even this, no matter what it may cost him in the long run.

He turned on his comm. and asked. "Frigate _Unyielding Resolve_, commander, are you in position?"

"Yes sir, we are finalizing our position in geosync orbit directly above the Presidential Palace and ready to provide fire-support."

"Belay that order, charge up your main gun and target the Palace itself. I repeat, ready the main cannon and target the palace."

"But-but sir!" The voice at the other end balked, "The main guns they're dedicated for ship-to-ship warfare. To use against a planetary target—And that's our people down there! And the President! We can't—"

"I am very well of that commander, and what the fallout will be. But I also know this: the moment the Rebels breach the Palace itself. If the President or anyone else is still inside, then they are dead already. Now, ready your cannon, fire on my command."

The young navy commander on the frigate was silent for a moment, then he affirmed, "Understood, Admiral. Spooling up the main cannon now."

Korra leaned back in his chair as waited. He knew that an orbital strike by the _Unyielding Resolve_ would wipe out all the Rebel forces in proximity to the Palace, but so too would the Hegemony forces currently battling the rebels, and perhaps damage the Presidential Palace as well. But for Korra, such as it was a necessary sacrifice to save the head of the Hegemony, and all too likely the regime itself.

****APUFMKII****

Jella Korrigan had finally reached the Presidential Palace itself. Taking a moment to gaze in wonder at the marble floors, fine

furnishings, and bright lighting. Reveling in her accomplishment for briefest of seconds (in her heart of hearts, she had always doubted that they would come this far).

Only for her attention to be snatched as a voice shouted, 'Dozer coming through!', as she turned, a heavily armored member of the Presidential Guard, far larger than the ones from before, shot at her. She hugged the floor as the rounds coming just too close for comfort. The self-proclaimed Dozer stepping over his own fallen comrades (who had died in a futile effort to bar the front door) as he advanced on the rebel leader, his machine gun still spitting out bullets at a frantic rate. Even as a dozen more Presidential Guards were rushing into the room as he fired on Jella.

Jella and her fastest followers had raced ahead of virtually everybody else to reach the palace. Unfortunately that meant that they had run straight into an ambush; the Guards opening fire as they entered the foyer. The Rebels had punched a hole into a less open area, but now only two members of the advance party were left.

Fortunately for Jella, the other survivor was a Spartan.

John got in front of Jella just as the guards all switched their focus to the rebel leader. Figuring that she would be easier to eliminate than the Spartan, and then they could focus all their attention on the super soldier. Moreover, all of them wanted to be able to claim credit for killing the leader of the Rebellion.

But the Commander of the Spartans was not such an easy target. Shooting down the guard trying to run at Jella with his Spartan Revolver, the twin .50 caliber slugs punching right through the guard's armor, ripping out the opposite end with explosive force, drenching the unfortunate guard's comrades in blood and gore. Even as first guard fell, the Spartan lobbed a grenade at the feet of the others. Shielding Jella with his own body as the resulting explosion reduced six of them to little more than bloody gore, the walls splattered in their remains and perforated by hundreds of flechette barbs, and severely wounding two more guards. Neither of the two bothered killing them, their deaths was all but certain.

The other survivors, protected by the bodies of their comrades, were dazed by the explosion. John wasted no time, instead of shooting them, simply grabbing both by the head and slamming them into the each other, their helmets shattering to pieces. The cacophony of fire stopped for a moment, the only sound was Jella's hard breathing.

John glanced over the Rebel Leader, seeing her exhaustion ordered, "Jella, take five. You need to rest for a moment." Before she could protest, John firmly pushed her down to the floor, "Rest, you're no good exhausted like this. We have that much time." It wasn't the truth, but John didn't want to risk her death simply because she was inattentive due to her tired state. The batarian leader mildly glared at the Spartan before submitting and leaning against a wall.

Satisfied, John ordered for any all units to have breached the Palace to sound off. Slowly, they began to respond, John counting just how many were actually inside. By the time Adriana had responded, who was

the last to do so, John frowned at the number. Nineteen. Not including himself or Adriana, the only Spartans inside the Palace, only nineteen Rebels had made it inside. That was nowhere near what they needed, but they would have to make do. He ordered everyone to rendezvous at his position if they could. But before that, he needed to know.

He switched to another channel, one he hadn't used it. "Spartan Lasky, I need a status report." Thomas Lasky, the one Spartan-IV still on Khar'Shan, was playing the radioman, relaying information as he got it from safety. "What are the status of enemy reinforcements?"

"Sir, there's still a battalion on the way, but it seems thats all." He reported. "The battle outside the walls is, hold on sir, something's up." John waited patiently, even as he watched his motion tracker for any incoming hostiles. "SIR! We've got a problem! We just intercepted a communication, Hegemony frigate is about to fire on the palace grounds, I repeat, they are about to fire on the Palace grounds!"

John didn't hesitate as he opened his comm. "All forces, pull back! Pull back now! Ignore the enemy, just get out!" The tone in John's voice alone was more than enough for everyone who heard it, even some Hegemony forces, to start fleeing for their lives. Some ran for the palace, trying to get inside, but the rest ran for the walls. John heard them over the radio though, the Rebels shouts and screams as they tried fighting their way out, their panic, and some cheers of relief.

Though most of the Hegemony ground forces had no idea what was going on and continued to fight. The rebels panic making them relatively easy targets for the soldiers. Many of the Presidential Guard wondering what had happened to rebel morale. Many of the more arrogant and/or stupid soldiers assuming that the rebels had simply lost heart in the face of superior and overwhelming firepower, thinking that they had won. Right up until the first of the supersonic shells came crashing down. Earth and stone cracked and broke as they rose like the petals of a flower, creating a macabre work of 'art'. Up and down the grounds, the grounds were broken and shattered, bodies and wreckage flying into the air, both Rebel and Hegemony forces alike. The supersonic shells heedless of rank or loyalties, only the laws of physics held any sway over them.

The Hegemony forces that had arrived had no chance, death claiming them in droves even as they tried to understand what was happening. The Rebels fared little better, even those who managed to the clear the grounds were not safe as bodies, wrecks and rock rained from the skies, tossed into the air by shockwaves, crushing any unfortunate enough to be in their way. Only a handful escaping the 'rain' as they did not stop running until their legs gave out from under them.

But the ordeal was not over for these few survivors. In their mad headlong flight away from the devastated battlefield, they ran straight into the arriving turian reinforcements. Who all but annihilated these unfortunates with a massive barrage of bullets, rockets, and missiles. Eager to avenge all their many comrades killed in rebel ambushes since the Hierarchy had sent them to Kar'Shan.

All told, when all was said and done, the lives counted, less than

twenty rebels out of a force numbering in the hundreds had survived to reach the Presidential Palace. Now only Jella herself, her Spartan allies, and nineteen of her fellow former slaves were left to finish the mission. Trying to reach the President Kol before the full might of the Hegemony and its allies fell on their heads.

****APUFMKII****

President Zolak Kol watched in horror as his Presidential Guard was all but annihilated by the weapons fire from the frigate Unyielding Resolve. While it succeeded in eliminating most of the rebel force, Zolak cursed at how his own forces were caught as well. Making matters worse was how the rebel leader Jella Korrigan and her Spartan allies had survived and managed to infiltrate the Presidential Palace.

On the video screens, Kol watched as a Heavy weapons specialist was taken down so quickly and easily that it shocked all of his staff present with him. But Kol himself was impassive. He remembered what the Spartans had done at the CASTLE facility. How they had easily mowed through everything and everyone stationed there. And all considered, if they were inside the palace, it was just a matter of time until they reached the underground bunker he and his staff were currently taking shelter in.

The Presidential Bunker was kilometers underground, meant to protect the President and his people in the event that the Presidential Palace itself was ever threatened. In theory, the bunker was designed so that even if the palace above was utterly destroyed, the bunker itself and those inside would be protected and unharmed.

But the Presidential Palace's formidable defenses were built to endure an assault by something along the lines of an attacking army or orbiting warship. Not against a small team of highly armed rebels. And most especially not a Spartan. Moreover, most of the Presidential Guard had already been wiped out by rebels or the Unyielding Resolve's indiscriminate attack. The remaining auto-defenses and remaining Presidential Guards inside the palace itself were no match for Spartan attackers.

Of course it was still possible that the rebels could be stopped before they reached him. But President Kol knew that he was probably going to die in the near future. The thought gave him an odd sort of clarity.

"Contact High Admiral Korra now." Kol ordered one of his flunkies.

Datak Korra's weathered face soon appeared on the giant monitor that dominated the main room of the bunker. Surrounded by a vast array of communication equipment intended to allow the President stay in contact with and lead his subordinates during wartime. And Kol had intention of letting such resources fall into rebel hands.

"Hello Datak, the rebels have managed to breach the palace." Kol bluntly told Korra. "They are tearing through most of what is left of my personal guard."

"I know but most their comrades have been slain by the orbital

strike. Reinforcements are enroute from nearby bases. And our turian allies have reported they are on the way as well." Korra said in an effort to reassure his President.

Zolak Kol had a bad tendency to believe what he wanted to believe, but he wasn't a stupid man. He knew that the moment the Rebels and their Spartan allies had breached the palace walls that he was most likely doomed. And he did not intend at dying at their hands.

"Korra, forget the plesantries, we both know those reinforcements probably won't get here in time." Kol said wearily.

As though saying those words gave him strength, the obese leader rose, standing straight as he tells Korra "If, or should I say when, I die here, I want you to leave this place. The palace, bunker, all of it. No matter what happens today, the Rebels can not be allowed to exploit my death for their own ends, or at the very least, be denied any proof to back their claims."

"You want me to destroy the palace!" Shock and surprised clearly etched across the admiral's face.

"Korra, they've already killed the legilslative branch, our executive branch is about to fall as well. Only the military and the judicial branch will be left intact after today." Kol replied calmly, the thought of having accepted his impending doom giving him both a sense of clarity and calm. "Do what you wish to explain your actions. Tell them the truth, blame the Rebels, it'll be your choice. But no matter what, remember my orders."

"Understood sir" Korra replied, clearly unhappy with the orders.

"We both know that with me and the senate gone it will be up to you to pick up the pieces Datak so I want you to promise me that you will do WHATEVER is necessary to crush the rebellion." Kol said fiercely, for once looking and sounding like the kind of man that the scarred old admiral could respect.

"You have my word, sir" Korra replied as he gave Kol the most sincere salute that he had ever given the politician. War, it was the greatest equalizer of all things. Turning men and women who had the least commonalities into brothers and sisters in arms, bringing out both the best and worst in all. And in the case of President Kol, it brought out the best in him.

Kol nods and then gestures to a flunky to end the call. Seeming to deflate as he contemplated what was left to do. Finding the idea of dying at rebel hands unacceptable.

Aside from the fact that the rebels were all too likely to torment and/or humiliate him first, Kol simply couldn't stomach the idea that a President of the Hegemony would die at the hands of traitors. The could not be permitted to have such a victory.

President Zolak Kol looked at one of the guards in the bunker with him. Seriously considering suicide for the first time in his life. Saying aloud, "Captain, please lend me your sidearm for a moment."

****APUFMKII****

Innovation, it was a concept well known by all races of the galaxy, indeed it was what had allowed them to become the dominant species on their homeworlds after all. But for the Citadel Council, after a time, it had all stagnated. No major changes in design ideology had occurred for hundreds, or even in the case of the long lived krogan and asari thousands, of years. Of course, thanks to humanity, that was all changing.

Because the UNSC had violently demonstrated that the Citadel species NEEDED to change their military technology, designs, and even doctrines. Otherwise they would probably spend the rest of their existences at the mercy of groups like the UNSC and New Covenant. Which as the destruction of Impera had shown, was all too limited.

As a result, the Citadel Council were attempting to reform, modernize, and expand their fleet. With the full backing of the asari, turian, salarian, and krogan governments. Because they were all determined to prevent the UNSC (or anybody else) from brushing aside the Citadel Defense Fleet the way that the human forces had when they had kidnapped the Council from their own capital.

Now the asari, salarian, turian, and krogan Councilors were all listening to a presentation by someone who might be able to help them with that.

Adela Brigh was the CEO of Illium Defense Products, which the closest thing that Elegant Solutions had to a business rival in the asari defense industry. Unlike Elegant Solutions, which was known for its extremely high quality, sophisticated, and streamlined products, those developed by the IDP corporation were more rugged, utilitarian, and more importantly, far less costly than their counterparts. Quantity as a quality all its own, as it were. In comparison, Elegant Solution was the craftsman, while IDP was an entire production line.

As expected, Adela Brigh was trying to convince the Citadel Council to create a contract with her company. But she actually offered some compelling reasons for doing so.

"Thanks to the humans' superior technology and firepower, any future conflict with them will involve significant losses." the asari Matron said reasonably as she looked up at the Citadel Councilors, who standing in their usual positions within the Citadel Tower audience chamber as they listened to her speak.

"It will take at least DECADES, if not centuries, to master the technologies and techniques necessary to build warships that are a match for the UNSC and New Covenant cruisers, let alone their dreadnoughts and flying-fortresses." Adela continued in that same tone. Her words causing Councilors Wrex and Cicero to scowl at her, although Tevos and Valdn showed no visible reaction.

"But that may not be necessary. Time is on our side, Councilors, as surprising as it may be." Brigh said with a confident smile. "From what they have shared of their history, the New Covenant is still recovering from their civil war, and have lost many of their engineers. The UNSC has fared better, but only just. While they do

have the engineers, they lack the facilities to build their strength. In the time it will take them to rebuild, we can amass entire armadas of such size, that it will give our enemies pause, however much firepower they may possess. After all, quantity has a quality all of its own."

"And this new...craft of yours, will help us do, what exactly?" Cicero questioned. "While initially they do seem...powerful, if ungainly, they are not what I would call, 'military-standard'." What the turian councilor was referring to, was the turian-triangle of military design. The belief that any warship to be used by the military, when designed, had to balance between three factors: firepower, protection, and practicality. How much damage could the design inflict against what targets, what could it survive, and how costly would it be to produce and train pilots for.

Of course, the purpose of the design was taken into consideration, but keeping a balance between what, ironically, many races considered the 'holy trinity', was a complex affair. A design of unparalleled firepower and protection could be considered far too complex and costly for anything except proof-of-concept at best. Inversely, if made too practical, at the cost of firepower and protection, the design would be rejected outright as being completely ineffective in combat.

IDP's Huntress-class however, seemed to have thrown out the idea of the trinity and focused on only two attributes: firepower, and practicality. In regards to size, it was larger than a standard drop ship, but smaller than a frigate. To use the human-classification, they were corvettes, crewed perhaps a dozen, though in theory, five could do so as well in a pinch. But that was not what made it stand out. The firepower that it could possess rivaled that of many Pre-UNSC contact dreadnoughts. Admittedly, that firepower came from the number of hardpoints where nuclear missiles of all payloads could be loaded and fired. This coupled with its over-sized engine nacelles meant that it was an extremely fast and lethal attack craft. Blazing ahead of its allies, firing its nuclear payload in an 'alpha-strike' before fleeing the battle with their superior speed. But it came at what could be seen as significant cost. In terms of defenses, the craft had virtually none. Aside from a kinetic barrier better suited for a dropship, it had only a single turret for point-defense and anti-fighter duty. The armor-plating was virtually nonexistent, an oddity as in the Post-UNSC contact era, many ships-of-the-line relied on both kinetic barriers and thick armor plating for protection.

All said, it was a 'glass cannon'. Meant to inflict a lot of pain, but unable to take any.

"I don't see the point in paying for something that would be blown apart with your standard AA emplacement." Wrex remarked. "If this thing is to be the start of a permanent Council Fleet/Armada, I want something that will actually be effective."

Technically the Council already had a fleet of warships, but while the Citadel Defense Fleet had been more than adequate when it came to occasionally patrolling the borders of the Citadel Races, protecting vital trade routes, and of course protecting the Citadel itself before encountering humanity, it wasn't big or powerful enough to provide a meaningful defense against groups like the UNSC or New Covenant.

The Council Fleet in question was to be an armada that was directly under the command of the Citadel Council, and only the Citadel Council. Rather than being on loan from the Council races and cycling in and out with the home fleets."

"Quantity is a quality all its own after all." Adela argued. "In terms of cost, in the place of a handful of dreadnoughts, enough of these ships can be built to patrol our borders in FORCE, and still have a fleet left over."

The Councilors mulled it over, as the idea of building an armada, or several armadas worth of ships, at the cost of a handful of dreadnoughts was very enticing. Their nuclear armaments could even give the UNSC pause. Possibly even the New Covenant as well.

It was only fitting one could suppose. Of all three superpowers, the UNSC warships was away and above the other two in terms of power and quality. The New Covenant was just a shade below the UNSC, but more numerous. Now the Council would fit the final niche of quantity.

Unnoticed by the Councilors or their Advisors, Adela was sweating under her dress. While her company was safe and secure from bankruptcy, even if she did not secure this contract. But securing this contract might make her a little safer from the Justicars.

Since Taiba's first target, several other well-known asari had been struck down by the Justiciar Taiba. While they did have a length of crimes and grievances, it was well known that all of them were against asari militarization as well. Adela hoped that with this, the Justicars would recognize her as a political ally. And in truth Brigh did support asari militarization both because that would be good for her business selling weapons, and also because she thought that another war with humanity was inevitable and the asari needed to be prepared this time.

However, Adela Brigh was in reality no ally of the Justicars. She hated them for purely personal (and extremely private) reasons. Moreover, she was also one of the influential asari secretly working with Councilor Tevos and Spectre Tela Vasir to bring down the Justicar Order. If she could keep under the radar, it would allow her, and potentially her fellow conspirators, to carry out their plans unmolested.

"Let's just vote on it." Wrex said impatiently. "We've spent enough time on this already. The others nodded their assent.

"All in favor of purchasing a bulk order of Huntress Class warships to add to the Citadel Fleet?" Tevos asked her fellow Councilors.

As expected, Cicero was in favor of the purchase, because the turian Councilor was virtually always in favor of doing anything to make the Citadel Defense Fleet stronger. While Tevos herself voted in favor of the purchase, to keep her fellow conspirator happy and because she needed to appear strong on defense thanks all the negative press the asari were getting due to the revelation of their common ancestry with humanity.

Valdn and Wrex however, were not so easily swayed. Wrex couldn't see any value in these 'Huntresses', as the asari called them. To him, a solid AA grid and flak-cannons would shred the craft before they would get close. A fact, that Wrex noted, Cicero had either missed or was ignoring entirely in his blind hate of the humans. More to the point, he was of the mind that it was better to stay with what was tried and proven, instead of diving headfirst into an unproven and untested design. Valdn was hesitant for similar reasons, but he also believed that, with enough time, the STG would be able to design something both superior and better made.

"You're voting against it Wrex!" Cicero said in surprise. Because he could usually count on the battlemaster's support when it came to votes to increase defenses for the Citadel.

"We shouldn't waste our money on an unproven design!" Wrex countered. "You want to risk sinking how much of the budget into something that may prove, in its first engagement, to be nothing more than useless cannon fodder! By Kalros, it may not even be that!"

"In war, you sometimes must take risks. Radical ones if need be." Cicero shot back.

While the two veterans were arguing over the value of the design, one of Valdn's aids approached him, and whispered in his ear. Without any fanfare, he dismissed the aid, waiting until the salarian male had stepped aside to he cast his vote.

The asari Councilor looked up in surprise as the electronic system registered Valdn's new vote. However Cicero and Wrex were too busy arguing to notice at first. Only noticing when Tevos said loudly (to get their attention) "the decision has been made Matron Brigh make sure to get the first shipment of Huntresses here in a reasonable timeframe please."

"What in the name of the Pit are you doing, Valdn!" Wrex cursed.

"I need to speak to you all privately." Valdn told the other Councilors grimly. Adela knew a dismissal when she heard one, so giving a quiet farewell and thanks for accepting her plans, she left. The CEO knew that the contract could always be written up and signed later. And whatever was going on, was well above her pay grade.

Valdn refused to explain himself until he had led them all to his private office. Trusting the anti-surveillance equipment there to protect his words. Then blunting informing them "the STG has just informed me that the rebels on Kar'Shan have murdered most of the Grand Senate and is currently waging a battle to fight their way to the President of the Hegemony."

For a moment, none spoke. Then Wrex gathered his wits and demanded, "What do you mean; 'The Grand Senate'? How could that be possible? Even with Spartan Aid, the Rebels don't nearly have the numbers or firepower to take them out."

"Apparently one of the lead senators liked to hold semi-official meetings at his private mansion. The rebels stormed one of these meetings and managed to kill so many senators that the Senate doesn't have enough people left to hold an official session." Valdn

explained.

"Again, I don't see how this is possible. The amount of firepower neededâ€¦" Wrex intoned.

"That's a simple question to answer: they didn't." Cicero replied, before any could interrupt, he pressed on. "It was the humans. It'd be naive, if not stupid, to believe that the humans have not advanced their own weapons and armor. We saw what they could do with standard human weapons, who is to say they didn't have something special for them and them alone?"

"That matches the data that the STG has gathered, but I am more concerned by the fact that the rebels are assaulting the Presidential Palace as we speak." the salarian explained. "From what has happened, we can only assume that the Rebels have a high chance of, or possibly have already, assassinated the Hegemony president. That is why I accepted the proposal. While I have my own...reservations, we need to increase our military power as largely and as quickly as possible. If these untested ships are to be that power, so be it."

Wrex started to say something, but Vald'n interrupted him "I know these warships are unproven BUT we need to appear as strong as possible right now and making the Citadel Fleet much bigger will help us do that."

"I think more pressing is how the public will react to this information." Tevos mentioned, "If not the public, than the other heads of state. This could be taken as proof that no matter who we are, no one is out of humanity's reach. And if that is the case, which of them would be next?"

"And in truth their fears are justified. If the humans used their full strength to go after the leaders of the Volus Protectorate, Asari Republics, or even Krogan Empire, we could not stop them." Vald'n admitted, his STG connections having made him all too aware of just how outclassed they were by the UNSC.

Wrex sighed, knowing when he was outnumbered. "Alright then, if that's how it is going to be. What's next?"

"Let us hope, and pray, that the their President survives, of course." Cicero suggested. "If he falls, I have a feeling that this 'Rebellion', will evolve, or rather, devolve, into something much uglier."

****APUFMKII****

"Stand your ground! Don't let them advance any further!" A Palace guardsman shouted. "There's only a few of them left! We-urk!" Blood spurted from his throat as bullet tore a hole.

Bodies littered the corridor, mainly Hegemony forces but the occasional Rebel body was scattered among the corpses.

Down the corridor, constantly pressing on the Palace guards, were the remaining Rebels. A simple straight corridor, it was almost devoid of anything to take cover behind. A perfect kill box for any defenders. At least, it would have been, if not for one, or rather two, big reasons.

John and Adriana. The two remaining Spartans were serving as living shields for their allies. Letting their shields and thick armor soak up the incoming fire, while Jella and the surviving Rebels fired from behind them with near impunity.

Although the rebels didn't know it, their task had been made much easier by Admiral Korra. Because while the Unyielding Resolve's attack had wiped out most of the rebel force, it had also eliminated over three-fourths of the Presidential Guard. Leaving only what the commander of the Guard had intended as his reserves to stop them.

The bombardment had also brought them precious time. The orbital strike was more than likely giving any reinforcements some pause as they tried to learn what happened and making sure that they wouldn't fall victim as well. It may not delay them for long, but for the Rebels, every second counted.

Even so, they needed to end this now. John and Adriana's armor was cracked and battered, their HUDs screaming at them to take cover and recharge their shields and minor suit breaches. John looked through his visor, gauging the distance between himself and the guards ahead. "Jella, on my mark, all of you, hit the floor." The Rebel leader signed that she heard him. Taking a few more steps forward, John glanced to Adriana who looked back and nodded.

"Mark!" Without hesitation, Jella and the other survivors immediately went down. Some diving right into a pile of bodies to do so. As they dove, John and Adriana moved, in the eyes of the guardsman, teleporting directly to them.

Bones shattered, necks snapped and organs burst as the two Spartans killed them with their bare hands. Killing fifteen guards before they realized what was going on. But the remaining nine that they were facing were the amongst the elite of the elite in the Presidential Guard. Coolly taking aim at the Spartans as they appeared next to their comrades. Then unleashing their full arsenals at John and Adriana.

Shotguns, rifles and even pistols unleashed a barrage on the Spartans. Supersonic pellets pinging off where they meet solid armor or flattening against the titanium-weave, a scant few penetrating the flesh beneath.

Jella stayed down, bullets flying overhead, putting her faith in the Spartans and John to end this final fight. Suddenly, a feeling of dread unlike anything she felt before rippled through her body when she heard John roar in pain. Daring to look up, what she saw chilled her to the bone. A hand was pressed against a now-shattered visor, shards of the golden visor still falling.

She had seen John's eyes less than a half dozen times, the last time she could recall was in Pride Rock City, before the city was razed to the ground. But all those previous times John had appeared as mechanically calm and composed as a machine. However, this time she saw pain and frustration in his eyes, and perhaps even a hint of fear.

Intellectually Jella had always known that John was mortal, but she

had gotten so used to him appearing virtually untouchable that it was a shocking and dreadful sight to see the Spartan so visibly hurt.

While she was not the strongest or powerful of individuals, there was something about her that even John had acknowledged. Jella was, almost without peer, the Fiercest and most determined person John had ever met.

In that instant, seeing John in that state, something snapped in Jella Korrigan. A feeling of rage and hate that eclipsed every moment before it, consumed her. And she let it.

The Batarian Guardsman, ecstatic at the fact that he wounded, possibly maimed one of the human's super soldiers, seized up as he heard a scream. An unholy scream to his ears. As Jella charged ahead of her protectors yelling like a lunatic, holding a long knife in her hands like a battering ram. The guards were too shocked by her mad attack to react right away, running her blade through the one who shot John with enough force to go all the way through. Jella's outrage giving her the lunatic strength to push her blade all the way through the male's body. Her charge slowing down only by the slightest, until she rammed both blade and body into a wall, pinning both against it.

The audacity and brutality of the charge froze the Presidential Guards, for all training and experience, slowing down their reactions. Much like a rank amateur chess player can sometimes surprise a master of the game through his unpredictability (because he doesn't know what he shouldn't do) Jella's reckless charge was so suicidally foolish that they were dumbfounded when she actually did it. Which allowed the still enraged batarian female to down another guard with a slice across his throat, and wound one more with a slash over his belly.

But by then the well trained and experienced guards had gotten over their shock. Aiming their weapons at the apparent madwoman amongst them. And if Jella Korrigan had been truly alone at that point, she would have simply died before she could do anymore damage.

Fortunately for her, she was not alone. Gunfire swept over her head, the guard's heads exploding in a fountain of gore as bullets found their marks. But the sight of dropping bodies didn't quell her rage, instead she turned and leapt blindly at the shooter, intent of tearing their throat out.

Only to stop in mid-jump, her arms held in an iron grip. Her legs flailed, trying to find something to kick, when she heard a familiar voice. "Jella, stand down! They're all down!" As the bloodlust faded from her eyes, a somewhat familiar face was in front of her. John's.

The visor was partially broken, a great hole over where his left eye would have been. The eye itself closed and weeping blood. She could see flecks of the gold visor embedded in his flesh as well. Jella didn't know that much about human anatomy, but even to her untrained eyes he looked bad. However, he did not appear to be on the verge of dying, and that was the important thing. "Are you injured?" Jella shook her head, no. "Good, we're here now."

"The gateway to the Presidential Bunker is through that door. Kalimaya reported, who had been hacking into Presidential Palace's computer systems since they entered the building. A waypoint appearing on their HUD for those who had them. "Be careful though, I can't open the door, or look inside. They cut off all access inside once we breached this level."

As the rebels began to walk through the doorway, Adriana realized that the guard the that Jella had impaled was still alive. In agony from his wounds, but not quite injured enough to die right away. As the Spartan moved to put him out of his misery Jella shouted "NO!"

"Let him bleed out, he doesn't deserve any mercy." the rebel leader continued coldly.

John shook his head, he made a note to himself to talk to her about this. But for now, they had no time for it. But he did as she wanted and left the 'survivor' alone.

As they left the dying guard behind, Jella was unaware that thanks to video cameras throughout the building Datak Korra was getting live footage of her actions. Which the admiral had already decided to would be useful in Hegemony propaganda to give her a new title. Jella The Impaler.

****APUFMKII****

The High Admiral watched in shock as Zolak Kol, the President of the Hegemony, and Datak Korra's own direct superior, committed suicide to avoid falling into rebel hands. The surveillance equipment in the Presidential bunker sending the image of Kol shooting himself in the head (as the president's own horrified staff and bodyguards watched) to Korra to in real time.

As the heavysset batarian politician's body fell to the floor, the Admiral's opinion of him rose sharply. Quite simply, Datak didn't think that Zolak had the guts to do so. Suicide was often considered the 'coward's way out', fleeing to death rather than fighting. But in this case, it was the more honorable choice. The rebels appeared to be on the verge of breaching the presidential bunker, and Korra had no doubt that the TRAITORS would have tormented and humiliated Kol before killing him. Now it was up to Datak to pick up the pieces.

"In death, you achieved what you could not in life." Datak muttered under his breath, a last show of respect to the batarian before he resumed his duty.

"Open all comm. lines. Wide-range broadcast on all Channels." He ordered. "I am taking command." The troopers and officers with him didn't respond, their eyes still glued to the screen, in total disbelief. Noticing this, Datak couldn't completely blame them. But that didn't mean he was going to allow it. "I gave you an order, so execute it!" He bellowed, shocking them out of their stupor, the proper officers moving to comply with Datak's orders. Shortly, one of them reported that the they were broadcasting.

"Loyal citizens of the Hegemony this is High Admiral Datak Korra and

I must regretfully inform you that President Zolak Kol has been assassinated" Korra said solemnly.

He gave the listeners a second to process the shocking news, and then continued in that same somber tone.

"He was murdered by terrorists and their alien allies, treacherous brutal scum that rely on ambushes and deceit to hurt our brave military forces."

Now Korra was becoming visibly angry. Allowing the people watching the broadcast to see his outrage. Bluntly telling them "these traitors also murdered most of the Grand Senate today, all but annihilating this nation's leadership."

Finally Korra got to the heart of the matter as he informed the galaxy "as the highest ranking member of the government left it falls to me to assume command and as my first order I am placing the entire Hegemony under martial law."

"From this moment on the first priority of every loyal servant of this nation is to hunt down every traitor and all their allies and eliminate them."

****APUFMKII****

Unaware of the broadcast that had just occurred, the Rebels were rapidly approaching their goal, following the waypoints as they were provided by Kalimaya. Taking stairs down to the Presidential bunker. Since the bunker was over a mile underground that they had been ambushed by remaining Presidential Guard several times on their way down. But they had finally arrived at their goal.

"It's just around this corner." Another waypoint appeared, "Butâ€|" the Rebels turned the corner. "It's a big door."

Big was an understatement. Taller than a Spartan, it was just as wide. Four massive bolts crisscrossed the front, their ends buried in the walls, floor and ceiling.

"Kalmiya, what's the depth and composition? Can we breach it?" John demanded.

"It's a quarter-meter thick, composed of ceramic, carbide and titanium." The AI answered. "We can breach it if we had a Covenant Anti-matter or Plasma breaching charge."

"Understood, Jella you heard her?"

"Yeah, but we got a problem. We don't have any charges." Jella replied morosely. "I spent mine before, and the others who were carrying them died or are outside. I didn't have a chance to grab one of them." She looked back at the other Rebels with her, looking over their gear. "No one else has one either, we're out."

John grimaced. "Kalimaya, do we have any other options?"

"One moment." John checked his armor, seeing what ordinance he had left. He still had the Rapier Cannon, but that wouldn't penetrate this. Not unless he had five hundred shells or so. And he only had

two left. He looked at Adriana who shook her head, holding up her sidearm and a single Covenant Plasma Grenade. "I've got it. Your MJOLNIR Armor, I can program it to detonate it like a shaped-charge. That door is rated to hold against a nuclear strike, but a shaped-nuclear blast should breach it."

"Is that our only option?" John didn't want to abandon his armor. It was just equipment, and it could be replaced, but he didn't want to be without it's protection.

"Yes, I'm sorry." Kalmiya replied. "There's nothing else to be done."

John sighed. The mission was what's important, after all. "Understood, Kalmiya start--"

"No." The Spartan Captain-Commander's head snapped towards the sole Gray team survivor. "We'll use my armor." John was about to protest, but the female Spartan didn't let him. "We can't afford to lose you, John. Between the two of us, I'm the more expendable. You're not. You _have _to _survive._"

John wanted to refuse, but found that he couldn't. His own sense of self-preservation aside, Adrianna had valid points. She was expendable. He as the leader of the Spartans, was not. Giving a silent nodded, he motioned for her to take off her armor.

Small explosives blew off the bolts holding the chest plate together. Taking the back portion, John planted it against the door and ripped open the back panel. "Kalmiya, talk me through this."

****APUFMKII****

The President's bodyguards screamed as the heavy blast-door exploded inward. Many of them dying outright as they were hit by fiery debris. Even more were injured as tiny metal fragments pierced their flesh. Unfortunately for the batarians, their ordeal was not yet over.

Scarcely was the molten metal starting to cool when bullets and bodies came through the breach. John lead the charge, his captured Hegemony rifle chattering as he dropped the remaining Palace Guards. The others bringing up the rear as the last of the Guards fell, seizing and grabbing ahold of those still standing, Jella clotheslining one of them as they tried to rush past her.

"Where is he!?" Jella screamed, grabbing the one she had clotheslined off the ground. "Where is Kol!?" The aide pointed a shaky hand towards a body, slumped over at the table. Jella threw them back down, going towards the body.

Grabbing the back of the fat male, Jella yanked it back. Growling as his face came into view. "Fuck!" Using the human term she had picked up from the humans among the Rebels. "The gutless bastard killed himself!" The other Rebels cursed at the news.

In frustration, Jella gunned down the aid, and then turned her weapon against the remaining members of the presidential staff. Stopping in surprise when she noticed that the most well dressed of the bunch was

laughing hysterically.

"What's so funny, asshole?" Jella asked rudely.

"You stupid whore. You and your human pets are all going to die here." The batarian's laughter coming out in halting breathes

"Explain." Jella demanded, grabbing him by the throat and putting a gun against his temple. "Now."

The head of staff actually grinned at her and replied, "The President himself ordered this palace destroyed, once you got here. The kinetic barrier's already shut down, they're going to hammer this place from orbit. But you're going to die before that!" With surprising speed, a blade appeared in his hand, jamming the blade up to the hilt in Jella's gut.

The Head of Staff didn't have a chance to enjoy his small victory before his head exploded. John had seen the blade as it appeared, his finger on the trigger as he reacted. But for one of the few times in his life, John was too slow.

Jella stumbled backwards, her hand gripping the knife in her. It didn't hurt surprisingly, and there wasn't a lot of blood she noticed. A small voice in her head told her that pulling the knife would be worse than just leaving it inside.

John was the first to reach Jella, ripping apart a med-pack in the small of his back. Ironically, it was the one thing that he scarcely used, as he wasn't sure if the bio-foam and synth-flesh patches would work with another race. Right now, John hoped it did, as it was all he had on hand.

John worked soundlessly as he ripped out the blade, before plugging the wound with bio-foam. Adrianna didn't watch, instead ordering the few survivors to the elevator, she knew what to do herself. She waited as John came, the now out-cold Rebel leader in his arms.

As the elevator rose, John addressed everyone. "We are not getting out of here. Not all of us." No one tried to correct him, they knew it as well.

"I get you sir." One of the Rebels said, a turian. "You and the commander are what's important. So it'll be the Hex Formation then, sir?"

John nodded. Hex Formation was a misnomer actually. The plan was that as a group of Rebels was retreating or falling back, the last man behind would take a defensive position until they fell, buying the others time. After which, the next man would take up the position and so on and so forth. A last-resort, for when someone or something had to get out at all costs.

"I understand sir." The turian continued. "I fully expected that I would die before this war ended. Just glad to have killed a few of these Hegemony bastards. And despite whatever my people may say about you sir." The turian snapped off a quick, if a bit sloppy, salute. "It was a pleasure serving with you, sir."

John was unexpectedly touched by the gesture. If somebody had told him before going on this mission he would one day care what an alien insurgent thought of him, the Spartan wouldn't have believed them. But now he found himself returning the salute as he replied "the pleasure was mine."

The elevator clacked as it reached the top, and without another word, they ran. The turian was the first one to stop and take a stand when they heard enemy reinforcements behind them.

"COME ON IF YOU THINK YOU'RE HARD ENOUGH!" the turian rebel screamed defiantly.

The screaming rebel died almost immediately. But he bought his comrades precious seconds. Giving them more time to evacuate the palace before it was destroyed. As the screaming died down, another Rebel stopped and turned, roaring in defiance as they opened fire until they were cut down. And again it repeated. Their numbers whittling down one by one, but there was no hesitation. There was no attempts to escape their fate.

The handful of Rebels fell down to only three: the Spartans and the Rebel Leader. Adrianna glanced over her shoulder, without having to slow themselves down for the others, the two Spartans had managed to leave their foes behind, but they still had a ways to go. There really was no other way.

The sole survivor of Gray Team stopped and turned. John stopped as well. "111, We need to move."

"John, just go. You can run faster if I'm not slowing you down, maybe even get past the walls, and you know it." She didn't turn back as she said this. "I don't have my shields either, so I probably won't survive anyway."

John was about to protest when Adrianna added, "Korrigan needs medical attention now. And if she dies, this will all be for nothing."

The Spartan Commander had to admit to himself that she was probably right. Jella was dying, and he wasn't sure the Rebellion could survive the loss of its leader. Because Korrigan was more than simply the leader, the former slave was the symbol and face of the Rebellion now.

"I expect to see you outside, Gray Leader." With those words, John turned and left, maximizing his speed. The Spartan glanced over his shoulder as he left, briefly seeing his fellow Spartan open fire on their pursuers before she disappeared from view as he turned a corner.

No longer having to slow himself down for the sake of others, John pushed both his armor and his body to its limit. John could feel his muscles and tendons straining, his already torn achilles tendon screaming at him in pain, and he knew he would pay for this later, but he ignored it. The Spartan knew he couldn't slow down. Blowing past anything in his path, a small dust cloud in his wake, those who saw him reacted to late or for an unfortunate few, were trampled underfoot.

It almost seemed like an eternity before he reached the grounds outside, not breaking his stride even as he leapt from a balcony. Not until he reached the outer wall and leapt over the wall.

Before the Spartans feet had even touched the ground the first multi-ton shell hit. Crashing through the roof of the Presidential Palace sending debris in all directions. Burying hundreds of batarians under rubble in the process. But there was no time to mourn. Because dozens of missiles struck moments later. The explosions sending wrecks and rubble into the air, some crashing into the structures nearby.

As the bombardment finally ended, and the dust began to settle, the results were plain to see. Where once there had a great palace, a testament to Batarian opulence, there was only a crater.

But John didn't see any of this, not waiting for the barrage to end. Instead, the moment his boots hit dirt, he kept running. Trying to outrun any debris that might fall and try to claim him. By the time the dust would began to settle, he was far gone from the ruined battlefield.

As John carried the dying Jella Korragan to safety, he saw no sign of other Spartans, and he was all but certain that the rest of the rebel force had been completely wiped out.

They had caused the death of President Zolak Kol and the destruction of his palace. But John was grimly certain that another 'victory' like this would ruin the Rebellion.

Author's Note (aDarkOne):

So the Hegemony definitely lost this day, but its not clear to what extent the rebels actually won.

Yes, they essentially destroyed (or at least shut down) the national legislature of the entire Hegemony. But in the process they accidentally saved the life of their greatest enemy. Moreover, the senators were somewhat willing to negotiate.

For self-serving reasons of course, but ironically Datak Korra is too patriotic to sell out to humanity. Whereas the senators might have been willing to let the UNSC/ONI essentially 'buy' the freedom of the slaves in the Hegemony.

As for President Kol, killing him (and destroying his capitol building) is a definite blow to the morale of the Hegemony. But now Korra is firmly in command of the entire nation, and has NO restrictions on his power.

Context is everything :)

(Follower38)

As my co-writer declared, this is nothing short of a pyrrhic victory for the Rebels. Already they had dedicated the vast majority of their hard-won and stolen resources to take out the bureaucracy heads, only to have it all be lost in only two engagements. War has more than several moments of irony. However small or large. WWII, Hitler escaped death many times, both by chance and by choice of the

assassins.

But such losses and setbacks are to be expected in war. The only question that remains from these two battles is the lives that were lost, were they lives well spent, or lives wasted?

And again, as my cowriter has said, all the Power now rests firmly in the hands of Datak Korra. Things are going to change.

31. Civil War: Trials, Deals and Hubris

Alternate Past, Uncertain Future Mk. II

Chapter 31

Civil War: Trials, Deals and Hubris

As far as humanity was concerned, the world Reach had once been second only to Earth in terms of population, industry, and strategic importance. As a Fortress-world, as many called it, it overshadowed all other colonies in regards to its sheer military might. Second only to humanity's homeworld itself. And it was the first of the worlds where Forerunner artifacts were discovered by humanity. Being the UNSC's fortress world, it was the headquarters of the UNSC itself, much like Earth was for the UEG.

During the Great War, Reach had nearly fallen against the Covenant armada. Entire regions were glassed, cities turned into little more than smoldering ruins and the once great fortress world of humanity ransacked. Yet, it had remained in human hands.

Now in the time since the Great War, the world of Reach has more than regained its former glory since the Battle of Reach. Some considered it to have surpassed its pre-war state. The cities had not just been rebuilt, but enlarged and expanded. Ruined facilities were restored, as was its military might, for all its branches all across the planet. In the space above, the great orbital defense platforms were rebuilt and replaced, its navy only outsized by the Home Fleet protecting Earth itself.

It was also the home of the Spartan Corp. Though admittedly, Spartan Captain-Commander John-117 never expected to return home like this.

"Let us...review your mission report again. Captain-commander." Lord Hood began. "You reported that Rebels had decided to strike against the Hegemony Legislature, and immediately following that, the Executive branch, in spite of their losses?" When John simply nodded in response, Hood briefly gave him a questioning look before returning to his neutral stance. The de facto leader sighed as he put the down the report, "Off the record son, just what were you thinking allowing this?"

To clarify the situation, John was not before a military tribunal, as he was not being charged with any crimes or court-martialed. Rather, he had been ordered to Reach after his latest dead drop, which contained his report that involved the loss of all three members of Gray Team. As such, only those who knew of the details of Operation Spartacus were present.

"As you said sir, off the record, it was my decision to let the batarian Jella Korrigan make the decision without any interference on my behalf. There was and is a level of distrust regarding humanity." John decided that, whether it be on or off the record, it would be better for him to tell the full truth." I had decided that to try to exercise control over Korrigan ran the risk of fracturing the Rebellion between those who would accept our aid and those who would reject it."

"Be that as it mayâ€¦" Paragonsky started, "That does not explain how three Spartan-IIs under your command died in only a single engagement." The ONI Section III Director tapped her copy of the mission report. "I find it difficult such a group of primitives can stop, let alone kill even just one of our top troopers."

Hood wanted to level a glare at his peer, but kept his focus on the once Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy. All Spartan-IIs possessed an impressive physique, and more than their fair share of scars. 117 seemed to have even more than the norm, even discounting the still healing wounds he had. The lost eye covered by a metal eyepatch until a replacement could either manufactured as flash-cloning one was not possible for the Spartans. The augmentation process prohibited it as they could augment the eye again. His face glowing red by the healing cuts. Hood guessed that the Spartan would have liked nothing more to deck the ONI Director, but was held back by his own discipline.

"With all due respect, ma'am. My Spartans did all they could, but we were still caught off guard." John said as he defended his fallen brethren. "Spartan Mike-120 died due to a high-velocity impact with a reinforced wall as he was violently projected by the explosion from an anti-tank mine. Cause of death was severe spinal and cranial trauma. Spartan Jai-006 died by a fatal hyper-velocity shot from an unknown weapons system. Cause of death was decapitation by ballistic trauma." Unnoticed by most was how John's hands had balled tightly into fists, the leather gloves straining against the tension.

"And what of Spartans Adriana-111 and Linda-058?" Hood asked before Paragonsky could. "You listed them as MIA but your explanation is somewhat...vague."

"I lost contact with 058 as she was displacing but I have reason to believe that she is still alive. 111 however, my last contact was during the retreat from the palace. She stayed behind to cover my escape." No one bothered asking if he thought she survived, the fact that he put her as MIA said enough for all of them.

"If you had describe the battle in a single sentence Spartan, what would you say?" Hood asked softly. The admiral still resented Parangosky for starting all this behind his back, and Hood still wasn't convinced that they were doing the right thing by fomenting insurrection and revolution in a nation that had done nothing to humanity. But regardless of the politics and policies involved, Lord Hood thought that their soldiers in the field deserved more respect and consideration than the head of ONI was showing.

"To quote Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke, sir: '**no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force'.**"

Hood, and to everyone's great surprise even Parangosky, smiled somewhat at that statement. "How very true."

"The enemy was well trained and well equipped by their standards and against the Rebel forces. They were fighting defensively and possessed superior numbers. For the record sir, taking into consideration all the factors, even the presence of my Spartans, my survival was not a guarantee."

"Did you realize that by wiping out their political leadership you would terrify the rest of the leaders in Citadel space AND put a soldier like High Admiral Datak Korra in charge of the Hegemony?" Parangosky asked coldly.

John nodded, "Yes, ma'am. None of these actions can be traced or blamed upon the UNSC, due to Korragan's public claims to them. The Admiral's rapid consolidation was however, unexpected."

"Besides Margaret this scheme of yours was always going to generate bad PR for us. There's no way that we can start an INSURRECTION in a neighboring country that were supposedly at peace with and come across as the good guys" Lord Hood said bluntly.

Admiral Parangosky glared fiercely at Hood. Not used to being spoken to that way, especially in a setting like this. Seeing such an expression from the terrible old woman would make most humans fear for their lives. But Hood was the only man in the military with even more real power than her, so he simply gazed back calmly.

"Moving on from the grievancesâ€¦" A third voice interjected, John smiled ever so slightly at the voice of his 'mother'. "What is done is done, what matters is what we are to do next."

"What then, is your recommendation Spartan?" Hood asked. "The UNSC can not, under its own auspice, aid the Rebellion."

John was silent for a moment as he considered his options. He had never run a covert operation of this scale before in his entire career. This wasn't even a covert operation by that definition. "I am...uncertain, sir. Until the Hegemony begins to show its new stratagem, which is all but a certainty now, it will be difficult to plan for. My only recommendation is the deployment of more Spartans for the time being."

Terrence Hood affirmed the decision. "Very well Spartan Captain-Commander. I'll authorize whatever you feel that you will need for the continued Operation. However, I do have one more question: what is the status of the batarian leader? You have implied in your mission reports several times that she is the lynchpin of the Rebellion, yet at the time, that she may compromise the entire operation."

John unexpectedly found himself reluctant to speak badly of the batarian woman that he had fought through so many battles with. It was one thing to admit to his doubts about Jella Korragan in a dry report. But saying them directly to Lord Hood's face felt like more of a betrayal. Nevertheless he was a soldier first and foremost so he said, "Korragan is still a potential risk due to her bloodthirsty nature. However she seems to have curbed that desire. Unless she were

to step down willingly, to remove her would do more harm than good, sirs."

"This is a problem of our own making. We deliberately built up Korragan so that the batarian slave population would have a symbol to believe in and rally behind. Because of that she's now influential enough that her virtues and vices can and has effected Operation Spartacus as a whole" Doctor Halsey added.

Admiral Parangosky disliked the fact that an alien was having such influence over one of her most important operations. But because Operation Spartacus was essentially her brainchild she doubted that anyone in the room would have much sympathy for her views. Besides, Parangosky didn't like confessing to weakness of any sort. "We always anticipated this possibility though, and have contingencies in place should Korragan go too far out of line."

Eager to change the change the subject, Parangosky informed the others. "The Asari Republics recently announced that they will be sending hundreds more commandos to 'eliminate the terrorists in the Hegemony.' How well will the rebels be able to cope with this new challenge?"

"The former slaves that make up the bulk of the Rebellion are not equipped to deal with a threat like the asari commandos. Even if they were, their numbers are now largely fresh recruits. They've lost the majority of their veterans in the last set of engagements. In the event that the Rebels are forced to engage the Asari forces, my Spartans will be taking the brunt of the battles." John bluntly answered, noticing something odd as he spoke.

Thanks to his enhancements, training, and experience John was very good at reading human body language. Therefore when he spoke of 'neutralizing' hundreds of asari commandos he noticed that it seemed to bother Admiral Parangosky. Which was very puzzling, because she certainly had no problem with killing, specially when it came to aliens.

The Spartan commander was becoming more and more convinced that the head of ONI had some sort of scheme in the works involving the asari. The only question was, what was Parangosky planning, and how bad would the fallout be once it reached its climax?

"Is it worth it, soldier?" Lord Hood asked suddenly.

"Is what worth it, sir?" John asked in confusion.

"This fight, this entire conflict." Hood clarified. "Are the lives being lost, the fact that you have become what you were made to fight against, does it seem we are in the right, Spartan?"

John stood in silence for a moment. He hadn't thought of it in the way that Hood had said. He was right though. The correlations between the Rebellion and the Insurrection were too many to deny. Yet, there were more than a few differences.

"I am not sure. In my eyes, the UNSC was never the Hegemony, the Rebellion is not synonymous with the Insurrection. I do not believe that we are in the wrong."

"Be that as it may, you have not answered my question, Spartan." Hood pointed out.

"Is. It. Worth. It?"

The Spartan took a breath. "Permission to speak freely, sir?" Hood raised an eyebrow in surprise but nodded anyways. "Lord Hood, I am a Spartan. An infantry commander. I am not a politician. I am not a policy maker. I can not decide if this will be worth it until it ends. And until that time comes, I only hope that as my 'father' has taught me, that the lives lost, were lives well spent, rather than lives wasted."

****APUFMKII****

The Terminus Systems. The lawless, unruly region of space at the borders of Citadel Territory. A haven for smugglers, slavers and all manners of criminals, alongside the runaways, the refugees, and optimistic colonists.

Being a lawless region as it was, it still possessed a hub of commerce and power. That hub was Omega. A once Element Zero rich asteroid, it long since been cracked open and its bounty mined. From the remains, came Omega Station. It was often called 'the Citadel of the Terminus', a polar opposite to the beautiful, rich and ancient construct. Few locations in the Terminus could compare to it. And of course, like all territories on such frontiers, it was ruled by the iron fist of a single individual.

That individual, was Aria T'loak. An asari whose past was unknown, but whose strength was undeniable. Nothing in Omega, or the space around it, passed or occurred without her knowing, and her cut of the profits. To ignore her, hide from her, or try to usurp her meant death, and that was if she was feeling charitable. To deal in the Terminus, was to deal with Aria as far as many were concerned. Which was why a human was meeting with the asari warlord in Afterlife, the club that served as Aria's headquarters.

"So, what brings my favorite human back to my doorstep?" The warlord asked as she gazed upon her latest visitor. "It's been a while since I last saw you, after all."

"I'm the only human you know, Aria." The ONI agent replied. "I can see you've been enjoying the fruits of our relationship quite well however." Said 'fruits' could be seen around them. Outdated and obsolete UNSC body armor could be seen being worn by those loyal to the asari Warlord. Those from the UNSC Army, Navy and Marines, some in intact sets, others in hodge-podge collections, from both Pre and Great War era. The trade was obviously not limited to just protection, but weapons as well. MA5-series rifles and M6 pistols were now a common sight on Omega; an image of their loyalty to Aria and her power.

"Yes, quite." Aria poured two glasses of Thessian Rum, before offering one to the ONI agent who took it. "I've found it enjoyable ending any upstarts with what they call 'primitive weapons'." Many in both Citadel and Terminus space had scoffed at the idea that the UNSC had used non-mass accelerator weapons in their short-lived war with the Council. Or the idea that they could be useful in the modern era. Aria had thought otherwise. "Their last moments are always so

satisfying to see."

"How so?"

Aria paused for a moment before answering. Taking in the sight of the ONI representative. Georgia Biggs was a small woman, blonde, fair skinned, and pretty in a girl-next-door sort of way. In demeanor, she tended to be polite and courteous. Which was why Biggs was used to represent ONI's metaphorical carrot, with other certain, less courteous individuals being the proverbial stick. Usually being sent to recruit people or groups to ONI's cause.

But Georgia Biggs' public persona was just a mask. Underneath the smiles and flattery was an extremely cunning and ruthless woman. Willing to do whatever it took to advance ONI's ambitions.

"A krogan mercenary with delusions of grandeur decided that he should run Omega, so him and his gang tried ambushing me the last time I left Afterlife. My boys were outnumbered ten to one in that little skirmish and we still managed to wipe them all out without getting so much as a stubbed toe." Aria boasted.

Of course the fact that Aria had learned about the ambush beforehand and attacked with the element of surprise was a factor too. But having superior firepower definitely helped, and it was certainly an advantage the asari never wanted to give up. UNSC arms, after First Contact at Harvest, were designed with the Covenant in mind. An overwhelming amount of both firepower and firerate to quickly take down and breach Covenant shields and armor.

Meaning, that when Aria's forces had ambushed the Krogan and his underlings, the UNSC weapons obliterated their kinetic barriers and so badly perforated their targets that there had been little left of their foes. After that incident, Aria had ensured that everyone loyal to her was equipped with UNSC arms, and made sure everyone knew it.

"So, what does bring you back to me?" Aria asked, "I assume that this is because of the 'Great Revelation', 'sister'?"

"If I'm your sister, how come you never call, bitch?" Georgia said with a smile.

Aria's watching bodyguards tensed at the insult but their boss only laughed. Georgia had quickly realized that the asari warlord didn't appreciate the insincere flattery that she used to butter up most people. So instead the cynical ONI agent let more of her real personality shine through when talking with Aria.

"But seriously, why are you here?" Aria asked coolly once she had finished laughing. Her demeanor making it clear that she wanted a real answer this time.

Georgia lost little joy she had at the question. "You were right, that it had to do with the 'Revelation'. My bosses sent me to see just what it's done here in the Terminus, specifically with you."

"What exactly do your bosses want from me Georgia?" Aria asked. She had given ONI a great of information, and introduced them to many

useful contacts in exchange for all the guns and other goodies she had gotten from ONI. But it had always been on a case by case basis. With Aria making clear that she was merely doing business with the Office of Naval Intelligence, not working for it.

"How strong is your position Aria?" It was a simple question, but meant so much more. Just how safe and secure was her grip on her power? Could someone or a group remove her from power? Or more simply, was it worth to continue doing business with her for ONI?

"I am the Queen of Omega and I have more influence in the Terminus Systems than anybody except maybe the batarians and since you're currently having your pet monsters try to overthrow their government, I don't think you can cut a deal with the Hegemony." Aria replied confidently.

"Influence matters little in the face of overwhelming odds and firepower, Aria T'loak. As the batarians can most certainly attest. I am talking about REAL power." Georgia shot back.

"Nobody RULES the Terminus Systems, human. People settled this area of space to get away from oppressive governments, societies, or corporations. It might LOOK easy to conquer to an outsider, but as soon as any wannabe conqueror's warships and troops leave a system Terminus people just go back to doing what we've always done. After we finish strangling the wannabe to death with his own intestines of course." Aria said with a sneer.

Georgia just frowned. While the warlord's declaration did answer her superior's question, such a concept was foreign to the Agent. An everlasting independence? At best it was a pipe dream, at worst a fool's folly. It wasn't possible.

"I suppose it must sound strange to somebody who grew up in a military dictatorship." Aria added when Georgia didn't say anything right away.

"And here I was thinking that you weren't an idealist, Aria." Georgia retorted. "Humanity tried that once before, you know. It was called the Insurrection. They wanted to turn the frontiers of human space into something like the Terminus. When the Covenant came during the First Insurrection, they found themselves without friends or allies. They simply became another number in the billions dead. They tried again during the Second Insurrection after the wars. The UNSC ended them with a single engagement."

"That's why you destroyed Impera wasn't it? You needed the turians to hate humanity because without a common enemy the whole system falls apart." Aria said as she looked down at Biggs. Feeling like she was on the edge of figuring out something vital.

"No, a single person destroyed that world because they had broken a peace that had not even lasted a single generation after we had been at war for a single generation." Biggs refuted.

"Neither of us were there so I doubt we will ever know the real story." Aria answered with a shrug. Then added, "However you measure it I'm the strongest person in the Terminus Systems."

"What. Does. ONI. Want." Aria demanded as she glowered down at

Biggs.

Biggs just sighed, evidently the asari wasn't going to answer her properly, least not properly for her and her superiors. 'I suppose it'll have to do for them.' She thought to herself.

"As you know, due to the Great War and the Council/UNSC war, humanity has been denied total access to the greater. We have been barred to anything but the barest of trades. Our only other option remaining is the Terminus. The question is Aria, can we count on your support when we do?" Georgia asked.

'Humanity is planning to expand into the Terminus Systems. And they want my support' Aria thought as she translated the political doublespeak.

It was a scary thought.

Humanity's military power was even greater than the Citadel Council's. And the main thing that had kept the Council from ever conquering the Terminus was lacking the necessary will and resolve to do so. Human expansion could bring an end to the independence that the people of the Terminus had guarded so jealously for centuries. But if Aria turned ONI down they would just go to some other Terminus warlord, and all too likely give him or her the resources to take Aria down.

Still, there was Aria's own pride and independence to consider.

"I won't be your stooge." Aria said bluntly.

"And no one is demanding it of you." Biggs replied, as she tried to defuse the tension before it could even form. "An alliance with the right people could see your family in power for generations."

Aria doubted that. Since since to an asari the term 'generations' could mean thousands of years. And she doubted the current human government would be around for that long. Still Georgia's words partially mollified her. So she asked "that seems...agreeable...but what do your bosses want from me right now?"

"For now, aside from a promise to prepare for the future, we would like an asari willing to work for humanity. More specifically, an asari extremely well versed in asari law and customs."

"I'll have to ask around but I think I can do that." the uncrowned ruler of Omega said carefully. Wondering what the humans were scheming. She almost asked Georgia Biggs what they needed the asari legal expert for, but decided not to bother.

She doubted she would get a straight answer out of ONI.

****APUFMKII****

The Aloe System was on the edge of salarian territory. None of the planets in the star system were capable of supporting life, it had few natural resources to speak of. It was an out of the way system that few had even heard of it, and fewer still traveled through it.

Thus making it the perfect locale for the Salarian Union and the Special Task Group's secret experimentation. Particularly, technologies and methods considered too dangerous to be explored on the homeworld. And for today, that meant Slipspace technology.

A salarian cruiser was parked in the middle of the system, its bow aimed at the general void. "Craft-1 approaching designated target zone. Translight engine is spooling up."

"Received, Craft-1. Ready your coordinates and prepare for test-phase." On a space station orbiting one of the dead worlds in the system, Mordin Solus was watching the test and all data feeds with keen interest. While officially he was still the security advisor to the Salarian Councilor, he was also the one in charge the STG's secret Slipstream Space program.

"Keep watch on all power-readings and sensors. Record all data in triplicate." The STG veteran ordered, his subordinates giving their confirmations as they carried out their tasks. Today marked what humans would call a 'Red Letter Day'; the first test of the purely salarian, and Citadel Council for that matter, built Slipspace FTL engine.

Nonstop work had begun since the Citadel's first introduction into the physics of Slipspace. Theories, equations and blueprints had been devised, discussed, explored and the vast majority scrapped to reach this point. The craft that was serving as the test bed was one of the redesigned Salarian warships built in the aftermath of the Citadel-UNSC war. It had been prematurely yanked off the production line by the STG exclusively for this purpose. Several systems, such as the secondary and tertiary weapon batteries had not been installed. The Mass Effect Core, the technology that allowed for their short-range FTL, had been installed but removed once arriving in the system. In its place was the slipspace drive.

Mordin knew that even if this test was a success it would only be the beginning. That it would still take months to years for the Union to design and build Slipspace Drives for all their warships (and probably even longer for the Citadel Races as a whole). Nevertheless, the salarian scientist was optimistic that this could be the first step to achieving military parity with the UNSC and New Covenant.

Solus watched all the data carefully as the prototype warship moved into position. Studying the readings as the vessel 'warmed up' its Slipspace Drive. Observing as the captain of the warship issued commands to his small and highly skilled crew. Feeling the anticipation build as the Slipspace Drive was 'activated'.

The reality-warping device engaged flawlessly, the energy feeding into it without issue. A fact that surprised no one, as they had already done so several times. Radiation surged as the energy built up on the cruiser's bow.

Those watching almost yelped in surprise as blue energy rippled across the cruiser's hull, it's kinetic barriers rippling in its wake. But that was the extent of it as a great blue disk ripped itself into existence directly before the cruiser.

'Disappointing,' Mordin noted, 'Edges of portal still jagged, torn. Human portals far more streamlined, cleaner.' Still he supposed, that was only because they were still learning the physics behind the portal. "Craft-1, status of portal and drive?"

"Sir, the portal appears to be stable, but the drive. We've sent a few engineers to make manual adjustments sir. We've got spares in case they disappear though." Mordin nodded in understanding. During earlier tests of slipspace drives, several engineers had tried to make manual adjustments to them mid-operation. However, many of those engineers had simply vanished, quite literally. No remains or ashes, just gone. Under normal circumstances, they would not have tried to do manual adjustments, prefer to just shut the portal down and adjust while it was on stand-by. No one tried to shut-down a slipspace drive after the first incident after all.

But desperate times called for desperate measures, especially with the humans and their batarian allies going after the leaders of the Hegemony with increasing ferocity. The leaders of the Salarian Union were all too aware of that fact that they might be next on humanity's hit list. So this project had been given the highest priority, those involved knew they had to do whatever was necessary to make a breakthrough. Even giving engineers tasks that they were all too likely to 'die' doing just so this test would succeed.

"Craft-1, permission given to proceed with test." Mordin confidently commanded.

"Understood, entering portal now, sir." Every eye was glued to the screens as the prototype spaceship entered the Slipspace portal. Observing the data from numerous sensors as the vessel slowly disappeared from view. Feeling the tiniest burst of satisfaction as everything seemed to go according to plan.

Several solar systems away, a Salarian STG Task Force fleet waited patiently. The strange thing about Slipspace was that every calculation they did, it always ended with a destination far from their starting location. At least, much further than Mass Effect travel was capable of with the use of Mass Relays. They were still working on formulas for shorter distances, for the past several years for that matter.

As the tail end of the craft finally entered the portal, it clapped shut with much less fanfare than when it opened. A collective sigh of relief sounded. "Continue recording of data. Will await communications from Arrival Fleet."

The warships of the STG taskforce waited patiently for a few minutes as the tension built. Communicating with Mordin Solus to make sure that everything was fine on his end. Then they waited for an hour with no sign of the prototype. Then another. And another.

Finally after more than half a Citadel day of waiting, they were forced to accept the fact: neither the cruiser, nor its crew, would be returning.

Mordin sighed, the STG would be officially black-marking this experiment as yet another cruiser's registry would be stricken from all records, as would the lost resources. The crew onboard memorialized, or at least as much as STG operatives could expect to

be.

He was not looking forward to reporting this to his superior, Councilor Vald'n. The salarian Councilor had been growing increasingly obsessed with matching humanity technologically, especially when it came to Slipspace tech (which was perhaps humanity's greatest advantage over the Council Races). It was a common obsession amongst the salarian leaders, who resented losing their traditional role in known space as the galaxy's greatest scientists. But with Vald'n it went beyond that.

Unlike the Dalatrass, who led the Union or most other salarian leaders, Vald'n had experienced humanity's power personally. When agents of the UNSC had assaulted and kidnapped him, and then easily fought their way through the soldiers and warships assigned to protect him. Then forcing the salarian Councilor and his colleagues to sign a treaty at, both metaphorically and literally, gunpoint.

Vald'n's own peace of mind demanded ensuring that such a thing be prevented from ever happening again. Which meant making the humans respect (or better yet fear) the Council Races' military power. And the most basic requirement to making that happen was the ability to reach humanity's core worlds, just as the humans could already reach theirs.

Today however, was a massive setback in that goal. And unless the cruiser returned from the dimension of slipspace, they would never learn what had gone wrong and why. For all intents and purposes, they were starting over again.

Mordin, while he was not dreading, was not looking forward to what would be a very uncomfortable meeting with the Salarian Councilor. His omnitool pinged as he received a message. Opening it, he read, "Sir, Councilor Vald'n requests that you contact him at your earliest convenience, for updates regarding the Project." Despite the kind wording, Mordin read between the lines. 'Request' meant 'demand' and 'convenience' meant 'Right now'.

Figuring that was would best to get the unpleasant task over with rather than keep the Councilor waiting, Mordin called the Councilor. The sophisticated STG equipment sending a message straight to the Citadel. With numerous safeguards in place to keep anyone from listening in, and with even more security measures added so that even if someone did, without the proper codes the signals would be nothing but meaningless gibberish.

Vald'n had been expecting the call so he answered immediately. A life size hologram of the Councilor appearing before Mordin. As a similar one of Solus appeared before Vald'n in the Councilor's Citadel Tower office.

"Greetings Councilor you appear to have lost weight I suggest nutrition supplements to stay within the healthy range of a salarian male of your height and age" Mordin said in his usual (all too blunt) way.

"Cut the pleasantries, Solus." Vald'n's face showing that he was not in the mood for any jokes or niceties. "What's the status of the slipspace testing? How did the drive perform?"

"Results were mixed: the prototype vessel successfully entered Slipspace but then failed to reappear at the designated time further data needed" Mordin replied.

"More data?!" Valdn snapped, "Damn it Solus, that was nearly an eighth of your entire budget that went into this prototype of yours! And you're telling me that it failed to show up at all?" His temper cooling somewhat, with a much calmer voice, added, "Do you have any theories as to the failure at the very least?"

"All UNSC and Covenant vessels that we have observed are heavily armored such protection may be necessary for vessels to survive in Slipspace of course it could be that in combination with some other factors as well" Mordin theorized.

"Heavy armor? So you're saying that your prototype possibly just fell apart because it was 'thin-skinned?" Valdn asked incredulously. The salarian councilor visibly slumped at the news. "Tell me, do you have any suggestions to prevent this sort of debacle from happening again? And do you have any potential candidates to serve as your replacement?"

"Are you firing me Councilor?" Mordin asked in surprise.

"No, not at all. But I feel that you are no longer best suited for this Project. That someone else would be best to advance this project." Mordin wasn't sure if he could believe the Councilor, already reviewing various contingency plans he had made if the STG decided to 'retire' him. "That said, Solus, I want to reassign you to Project Bruticus. The current project head says that it will be ready in a matter of months, but I feel it needs to be accelerated. Something I only trust that you can do. After all, I recall the work you did regarding the scrapped Opius project with the turians."

"This behavior is atypical of both you and the STG Councilor what has changed?" Mordin asked thoughtfully.

"It's the Batarian Rebellion, they have become...a threat." Valdn answered. "More so than we've ever expected or planned for them to become, Solus. The Hegemony Legislature and President, along with most of his Cabinet, have been assassinated by the Rebels. Both of them in a single day. There's barely a handful of survivors, and the military has been forced to declare Martial Law to maintain order."

That certainly changed things. If the humans had gotten to the point that they were killing the leaders of the Associate Races then potentially no one in Citadel Space was safe. So he replied "understood need to increase salarian martial power paramount when do I leave?"

"As soon as you're capable of." Valdn keyed his omnitool. "I am forwarding you all the data I have on the Project, along with a copy of my orders that you are taking over the Project. Also, Mordin, be careful with these subjects. While we have negotiated with the leader of this species, this Maccabeus of Dosaic, I do not trust them. Be cautious."

With that Councilor Vald'n ended the call. Leaving Project Bruticus in the hands of Mordin Solus. Mordin hoped that he could fulfill the Councilor's expectations this time, considering the stakes involved.

****APUFMKII****

Pallin Jared hadn't experienced this kind of giddy excitement since he had been a child playing with toy soldiers. But this was no children's game, because now he had a real army under his command. However, the chairman of the Sons of Impera had to share authority with his asari treasurer.

At least in theory.

In practice, the chairman had almost all the power within the organization, the power that mattered at the very least. Treeya Nyxeris controlled the purse strings of the Sons, but Jared had had a great deal of influence over her ever since the matriarch fell under the sway of his hateful message. Influence that had only increased since the Revelation, because now Treeya was desperate to prove that both she and the asari people as a whole, were not being controlled, guided, or even influenced by humanity in any way, shape, or form.

But the militia that the Sons of Impera had formed was still officially headed by Treeya herself. So Pallin Jared had to let Nyxeris think she was in charge. Which was why he was now answering the questions of the nervous former businesswoman, who seemed to want to go over every detail of the operation before Jared and his troops left for Kar'Shan.

"Are we SURE that our asari fighters have already arrived on Kar'Shan?" Treeya asked as the shuttle she and the chairman were on took them to the main spaceport on Palaven, where Jared was meeting up with most of his troops.

"No, but Jona Sederis said that they should get to Overseer City in a few hours." Pallin replied patiently.

Jona Sederis had been the obvious choice to lead the asari fighters he was sending ahead to scout and establish the Sons presence in batarian territory. Well before he arrived with the militia's main force, Pallin still remembered the basic rules of warfare instilled into him during his mandatory service in his youth. Jona was personally loyal to the chairman, a skilled soldier, and hated humanity even more than Jared. Perhaps most importantly, Pallin knew that Jona would do whatever it took to win.

"A few hours?" Treeya gave him a blank look, "Shouldn't they have been there earlier?"

Pallin shook his head. "Better they be slow and secure, than quick and sloppy." Looking over the matriarch, who was decked out in a brand new set of Serrice Council armor. "How does the armor fit?"

"Comfortable, if tight." She answered. "I'll adjust, it's just a new fashion sense for me." What she didn't add though, was how nervous the armor was making her feel. It wasn't just a set of armor, for

her, it was physical proof that she would going into what amounted to a true warzone. It was the first step to yet another massive change in her life.

Unbeknownst to Treeya however, was the fact that the Chairman had absolutely no intention of sending her into any firefight if he could help it. First off, he wasn't about to risk anyone that was following him being killed by her incompetence. Secondly, in the event that she proved to be a battlefield messiah yet to be revealed somehow, which he **_**seriously**_** doubted, he wasn't going to allow her to steal his glory.

Winning fame on the battlefield would give him the political capital to do what so many turian war heroes had done before him and pursue high office in the Hierarchy. Once he had done that he could start making the Sons anti-human policies into law. So that the the Citadel Races could finally get on the CORRECT footing when it came to dealing with the 'apes' from Earth.

As the shuttle arrived at the spaceport Jared gazed out the window. Taking in the sight of hundreds of turians, with a few salarians and other non-turians scattered here and there, preparing to get aboard the freighters Treeya had recently purchased for this mission. The shuttle settling down on a raised platform so that Pallin could gaze down upon and address the whole crowd. As he exited the shuttle his followers began to murmur excitedly. Waiting for The Leader to address them. A waiting militia member handing Pallin Jared a microphone before he began to speak.

"Sons and Daughters of Impera, years ago, we all came together in a moment of grief and despair. When the humans destroyed our namesake, and killed our friends, our families and our loved ones. Before that day, we were strangers, rivals, and even enemies with those we now call our comrades. And in that moment of weakness, we came together, and have grown strong."

Jared paused for a moment, making sure that he had his audience's full attention. Then he started to speak in more somber tones. But with an expression of quiet fury etched upon his face.

"But our enemy remains active. The influence of the apes from Earth continues to spread throughout known space like a cancer. The DISEASE has spread to the Hegemony, threatening to turn the entire nation into nothing but a puppet state for terran monsters. Monsters that threaten to destroy everything we hold dear."

"No longer. Today, we leave to begin our campaign to take hold of the ape's influence and cut it away like the malignant parasite that it is!" Jared shouted, his followers cheering at the words. He gestured for Treeya Nyxeris, who had been standing behind him throughout the speech, to come forward. The matriarch seemed uncomfortable having so many eyes upon her, but she nevertheless stood straight. Heavily drawing upon her experience dealing with shareholders when she was still a businesswoman.

"Treeya Nyxeris who has tirelessly worked to build up the Sons since the beginning will lead this charge. Leading us to victory as we crush the agents of HUMANITY beneath our knees like the snakes that they are!"

As the crowd began to cry out in support of Treeya the matriarch was filled with an elation and pride she had never felt before. This was far beyond the dedication of workers who felt appreciated and well compensated or the gratitude of shareholders that she had made rich. These people were praising her as though she were a goddess; an avatar of victory who could do no wrong.

Watching the expression on his treasurer's face, Jared knew that she was fully committed now. The kind of hero worship that she was getting a taste of, the feeding of her ego, was all too addicting. Countless individuals had fallen to its enticement before and been consumed by it. Now he just needed to accomplish one more thing to pierce humanity's aura of invincibility and propel himself and the Sons to the heights of power.

Humble and humiliate a Spartan, and let the whole galaxy watch as he did it.

****APUFMKII****

Far from notions of genocide, feelings of hate and thoughts of revenge, the galaxy was in a far calmer state of affairs on the border world of Jarum. Particularly in the capital city of New Ozai and within the new dwelling of one special family.

The 'Kissing Cousins' couple, and their two children were having their first dinner in their new home since having, more or less, abandoned their previous home to escape the press that had hounded them since their Revelation.

"Daddy, couldn't we live somewhere better?" Jane, Michael's pretty blonde daughter asked.

"You promised that we would live in a place like we did when mom was around" Jane added.

Their new apartment wasn't a suite by any measure, but it was a step from where the family had been living before. Though for Jane, the home she had when her mother was still around had been 'much' better. "Aleey agrees with me, right?"

"My name is Aleesha." the asari child whined. Upset by the way that Jane always seemed to be giving her nicknames. Turning to Rayna Cardiga as she said "mother make her use my real name."

"Mother make her use my real name." Jane said in mockery before sticking her tongue out at Aleesha.

"Settle down, both of you." Michael chastised. "We're living here thanks to our new friends. Be thankful to them."

"But daddyâ€¦!" Jane began to whine, only to yelp in surprise as a tennis ball flew well over her head, but still ducked in surprise. As she looked back up, she glared, as best as a child of her age and stature could, at the 'attacker'. "You jerk!"

"Oh calm down kid, it wouldn't have hurt you." Katya said with a smirk. Earning a smile from little Aleesha and a frown from Rayna and Michael each. Jane stuck her tongue out at the 'asari', who responded by holding up another tennis ball.

"Us asari have to stick together." Katya told Aleesha in a mock whisper. Ignoring the look from Jane, Katya focused on the couple. "So, how have you two been settling in?"

"This place is lovely." Rayna said sincerely with a smile.

The pleasantly plump asari was wearing a sundress as she sat at the head of the dinner table. Michael was sitting at the other end of the table dressed in a T-Shirt and jeans, while the girls were wearing matching swimsuits as they were planning on using the pool outside right after dinner. Whereas Katya and her 'girlfriend' Janice Jackson were sitting across from each other, wearing seemingly ordinary clothes that they had actually spent a significant amount of time picking out, to make sure that the outfits looked respectful yet casual.

"I'm glad to hear that." Janice smiled. "I had to pull some strings to help you, but what's a few favors between friends?" In truth, she hadn't even done anything of the sort. The apartment and all its amenities had been in place to serve as an ONI refuge but repurposed once Janice had requested it. "I'm just glad to hear its working out so well for all of you."

Michael turned to Janice the only other human in the room as he asked the woman "have you been watching the news recently?"

"Yes I must say its terrible what happened to that batarian president I hope that our own people aren't really involved" Janice said insincerely.

"I don't know...I know virtually nothing about this President Kol as a person but considering the things the batarian government has done while he was in charge I can't say that I'm sad he's gone." Rayna told them.

Everyone looked at Cardiga in surprise. The asari matron was one the nicest and most forgiving people that any of them had ever met. Rayna saying that she was glad that somebody was dead seemed pretty out of character.

As though reading everyone's thoughts, "I meant what I said" Rayna said defensively. Then added softly, "when I think about what they have done over the centuries to others, and what they would have done to me and mine if given the chance..I can't explain but my blood runs cold."

That put Rayna's comments in a whole new light. Considering her caring nature, it made sense that she would feel sympathy for the victims of the Hegemony. Moreover, one of the few things that people didn't realize about the matron, was that Cardiga could not and would not forgive any who tried to hurt her daughter. So knowing of the Hegemony's reputation and the actions that they condoned, it made it very easy for her to condemn the autocratic nation.

However, that was not the only thing the ONI agents saw within the matron. 'It looks like there's some fire under all that softnessâ€¦' Katya thought cynically. 'Now all we need to feed it and let it out.' More convinced than ever that they had done the right thing 'recruiting' Michael and Rayna for ONI's next big project. 'There's

not much scarier than a mother protecting her children when it comes down to it.'

"You and Rayna have a lovely family" Janice told Michael. The seemingly spontaneous compliment surprising the couple as it was quite the tangent from the previous topic. Pressing on, taking advantage of their surprise, she asked, "I'm curious though, I don't see anything like a wedding band on you two. Too busy to tie the knot'?"

Rayna and Michael looked at the woman in surprise. Even though they were lovers, living together, and raising each other's children in the same house (with Rayna thinking about possibly having another daughter with Michael), they had never thought about getting married. Humans were regarded by most people, including asari, under the wing of the Citadel as dangerous outsiders at best, and violent treacherous genocidal savages at worst. Cardiga and Smith wasn't sure it would even be legal anywhere in human or asari controlled territory for them to get married, and doubted anyone would perform the ceremony.

"I'm...not sure it would even be possible for an asari and a human to get married." Michael admitted.

"Why not?" Katya rebuffed, "I don't see any legal issues about it myself. Unless someone passed a new law while we were talking." Suddenly with a feral grin, she leaned forward, "Unless, of course...this is an 'open' relationship?"

Cardiga wasn't sure what the 'asari' meant, but Michael did, as his face went red at the implied statement.

"Katya!" Janice slapped her friend across the shoulder. "Don't say something like that! Especially with children here!"

As if on cue Aleesha asked, "mom what's she talking about?"

"I'll tell you when you're older," Rayna told her daughter, having finally figured out what Katya meant and having NO intention to discuss such a thing with her innocent (but all too curious) little girl.

Janice just sighed at having 'dodged the bullet' with the children. Deciding to move back to safer topics, "While she could have worded it better, I agree with her. I don't see anything blocking you two from getting married. Don't you two love each other? I've seen married couple with more issues than you two."

"Of course I do." Rayna and Michael said at the same time. Then looked at each other in surprise. But then the asari matron spoke as she admitted, "It's not about lack of love...it's just that...humans are so hated and feared by everybody that I doubt anyone in Citadel space would marry us."

"And it's not much better in UEG-controlled space either...the Great War made xenophobia the norm back home. Most humans would probably consider us traitors just for beingâ€¦" Michael almost said lovers, but then he remembered children were in the room and finished with "...friends."

"So, that's it then...is it?" Janice almost whispered. It wasn't a surprise that it was a reason, but rather **the** reason. "You're afraid of having nowhere to run to, is that it? You'd be outcasted everywhere."

"So you not going to be my new blue mother?" Jane said with a pout. She actually liked Rayna and her daughter, but her motives were entirely mercenary. Because Janice had pointed out when Rayna and Michael had left her alone with the girls that night, that if Rayna became her stepmother, she would get birthday presents from THREE parents (her father, her absent mother who still mailed her birthday presents, and Rayna herself). Rather ingenious for a child, but expected when it came to such matters.

Katya smirked while Janice outright giggled at the little girl's declaration. Rayna's dumbstruck, jaw-dropped look only adding to the effect. "You should close your mouth, Rayna, before something decides to fly inside." With a near audible 'click', the asari's jaw snapped shut, briefly glaring at the human woman before gently smiling at what had become her pseudo-stepdaughter.

Meanwhile Michael was thinking furiously. Unlike Rayna who had simply outlived all her previous mates, including Aleesha's salarian father, Michael's ex-wife was still very much alive. And she was at least as xenophobic as the average human. Smith wondered how she would react if she found out that her daughter Jane was being raised by an asari.

As though reading Michael's mind, Katya decided to break the silence, "You know, I haven't read much in the way of human literature. But there was one author who stuck with me. Specifically a quote of his, 'Do not go where the path may be, go instead where there is no path, and leave a trail'. Ralph Waldo Emerson." When she received confused looks from all of them, she explained, "You two are a symbol now. A beacon. If you decide to try to get married, that's going to send a message to everyone. And maybe," Here she glanced over to Janice, "maybe others will follow you too."

Michael and Rayna exchanged uncomfortable glances. While they DID want to make the galaxy a better place, neither of them had the ambition or confidence to be comfortable with setting themselves up as a role model for the people of the civilized universe. Not to mention the risks involved, of having the all the hate directed towards them, and by relation their children as well.

"You know, if you two did get married, it might distract everyone from all the negativity in the galaxy. Make them focus on the good and peace, instead of fear and war." Janice suddenly added. "Give people some hope, something to look forward to." As the couple in question shared looks and contemplated the idea, they were ignorant of how the two agents before them were already planning on how to best use their new friends.

"We will look into it" Michael said, to which Rayna simply nodded.

The words themselves were mild, but based on Michael and Rayna's tones and body language the ONI agents knew that they had convinced them.

'Perfect...I knew they would be useful and with any luck at all the asari will never even realize that we've beaten them at their own game' Katya thought with a smile. Not even Janice able to guess at the cynical thoughts running through her mind as she played the role of the helpful but somewhat mischievous asari friend.

****APUFMKII****

Far from the courts of humanity, conspiracy of civilians or the deals of outlaws, the Shadow Broker sat content aboard his ship, hidden within the borders between the light and dark sides of the world of Hagalaz and its storms. A ship, that had been under the Broker's control since, well, several of their predecessors. Because there had actually been many Shadow Brokers, with each one ascending to the throne by assassinating his or her predecessor. The current Shadow Broker was perhaps the most paranoid. Virtually no one ever saw him in person and he almost never left his heavily defended office. Surrounded by databanks filled with secrets that could easily save lives, destroy careers, or start wars. And since his business WAS information, business was good.

And business had only gotten better since the arrival of the humans. Explosively introducing themselves to the Galactic Community, they backhanded the Council's military might as though the Council Races were petulant children. Terrifying the known universe's Powers That Be by kidnapping the Citadel Council, and outraging the turians and their allies by destroying the world of Impera. And as a result, kicking off what was perhaps the greatest Arms Race in recorded history.

In the aftermath of these events, there was now a need and desire to seize any and all samples of human technology that they could get ahold of. Weapons, armor, even simple parts of ship plating was highly desired. And of course, where there was a demand, the Shadow Broker was more than happy enough to provide a supply. The Shadow Broker and his numerous agents were raking in enormous profits faster than ever before, and if they could have had their way; this state of affairs would continue indefinitely.

Unfortunately another war between humanity and the Citadel Races was, in the Broker's eyes, all but inevitable. Between the turians desire to avenge the loss of Impera and humanity's own continuing attempts to expand their influence at the expense of the Council Races, it appeared to only be a matter of time until another galactic war broke out. The first of the Proxy Wars had already begun, with the Batarian Civil War. The Rebels backed by the humans, and the Hegemony by the Council. It was only a matter of time before another such proxy war broke out.

But not yet, not quite. While the Broker didn't know the plans of the UNSC, he was fairly confident that the humans were going to make sure that when war did break out, it would be on their terms. For the Broker, a never ending Cold War between the major Superpowers would suit him best. However, he doubted that was possible.

Normally the Shadow Broker did not care who won a war. But a new war between the Citadel Races and the UNSC was all too likely to end in the conquest and/or destruction of the defeated party. If humanity was conquered or wiped out the Shadow Broker doubted it would really

change anything for him and his organization. But if humanity wonâ€|

He had heard of their proliferation of Artificial Intelligences. From the more basic units to those that behaved like an organic would, but with far greater intelligence and power. Those alone would cripple the ability of the Broker's agents to gather data and hide amongst the masses. What good were firewalls and proxies if an AI could simply push them aside as though they were never there? Taking into consideration humanity's military power and xenophobia, along with the reputation of their Office of Naval Intelligenceâ€|

Probably meant that the Shadow Broker would not be able to continuing operating in the event of humanity conquering the Council Races. With the advantages granted by their A.I.s, their already large and powerful intelligence gathering apparatus, and free reign of the former Citadel territories, the humans would be ready, willing, and able to track the Broker down. The Shadow Broker wasn't sure whether the humans would try to make him and his organization work for them at that point or simply kill him and seize all his assets. But either possibility was intolerable to the powerful information broker.

But that was a worry for the future. At the moment neither the Council Races nor the UNSC seemed eager to enter into a full scale war, or resume it as it were. The Shadow Broker had more pressing concerns, such as the Justicar situation.

The Justicars appeared to be trying to track him down, or at least fatally damage his network. This was the not first time they had tried to do so, nor was he the first Shadow Broker to be targeted. Fortunately his organization was compartmentalized to the point that virtually all of his agents could reveal no more than a few of their comrades. Each time they had gone after his network, and by extension his agents, the Justicars quickly found themselves time and time cut short as their leads were exhausted. The Justicars involved halting their efforts shortly thereafter.

This time however, was different. Rather than hunting for the Broker, they were hunting something else...More specifically, they were hunting his Agents. From the most elite of his forces, several just shy from the ranks of the Council Spectres, to the most inexperienced of recruits in his private army. The Justicars had learned from their prior efforts. This time, instead of trying to cut off the phantasmal head, they had chosen, to use a human term, 'death by a thousand cuts'. Simply put, if they could not kill the Broker, they would kill all under his command. Tear the Broker's Network apart piece by piece until there was nothing left but the Shadow Broker himself. This way, even if they failed to kill the Broker, they would have effectively neutered him.

And they had already begun their new Crusade. He had already lost dozens of agents. Most of them were fairly low level, but a few of them had been in key positions. One key fact about those agents however, was that the vast majority, if not all, had been stationed in Asari space. The Justicars were apparently cleaning house. Furthermore, more than a few of the veteran Agents had been captured, and then interrogated. The data they had apparently given leading the Justicars to more and more senior members of his organization. If this pattern continued, the Broker would soon be blind to the dealings within Asari space.

Something that the Shadow Broker could not, and would not, tolerate. While the Justicars might have started their Crusade, the Shadow Broker would end it. And he knew just how to accomplish that. Entering a few commands onto the console before him, he waited for the response.

The tattooed face of Tela Vasir, Council Spectre appeared before him. She was wearing nothing but a bra and panties, revealing a lot of shapely blue flesh, as well as numerous tattoos, and a few scars from close calls during her dangerous career as a Spectre/Shadow Broker agent. There also appeared to be bite marks on her neck and breasts, and Tela seemed more...agitated than usual.

"Vasir, I trust that you are...well." The Broker did make an effort to seem...sociable, with his more competent Agents. Despite his total disregard for their lives as a whole.

"To be honest sir you called at a bad time I was busy maintaining my GOOD working relationship with Councilor Tevos when you called" Tela said with a little smile.

Glancing over Vasir's shoulder, the Broker could indeed see the sleeping body of the Asari Representative. 'Interesting.' He thought, 'This could prove invaluable in the future.' He made sure Vasir saw where his focus was, "I trust that this line is secure, Vasir? There is some...business that needs attending to. And quickly."

"I have all the Councilor's security codes now. The ones she didn't just tell me were easy enough to figure out based on what I already knew. This line is the most secure in the Citadel." Tela confidently replied. Then added "as for Tevos herself I gave her enough sedative to knock out the old girl for hours."

The Broker nodded as Tevos proved once again, why she was one of his Top Agents. "Well done. Moving to the matter at hand, how far along is your conspirator's plans to end the Justicars?"

The Shadow Broker knew all the details of the conspiracy because Tela herself had told him. In truth she would rather not have gotten her boss involved. But even if she hadn't told him he would have found out eventually, and if the Shadow Broker found out that one of his top agents had kept something like that from him, he wouldn't have hesitated to have the agent in question killed.

"Everything seems to be proceeding according to plan. At this rate I think we will be ready to make our move against the Justicars by the end of the year" Tela replied.

"No, that is unacceptable." The Broker interrupted, "The Justicars have to be eliminated before the year's end. Several months in advance." Seeing Vasir's shell shocked reaction, the Broker explained. "The Justicars are tearing my network apart in Asari space. It will not be much longer before they move on to the rest of Citadel space, and cut off my influence in the Republics. That can not be allowed to happen, is that understood?"

Part of Tela wanted to protest. To say that most of the conspirators were experienced old matriarchs, but were still stuck in the old ways to using time and patience to carry out their plans. That they would

balk at the the idea of, in their eyes, a hasty and reckless plan. But she knew that the Shadow Broker was not the type of boss who would tolerate excuses. Besides, if the Justicars were cutting their way through the Broker's network it would eventually lead them to her. So she simply asked, "How long do I have?"

"Six months, if the Justicars do not further accelerate their actions." The Broker replied. "I will grant you and your conspirators whatever resources you will need to accomplish this, but realize this: this is an order, not a suggestion. Should your fellows refuse to follow it, tell them that once I lose my reach within the Republics, I will begin to reveal their identities one by one to the Justicar Order. Should my Network fall, I will ensure that I do not go alone, is that understood?"

"Yes sir." Vasir said formally. Without another word, the Broker cut off the connection, leaving the asari Spectre to her thoughts and lover.

Tela Vasir sighed as she sat lay down next to the Councilor. Cuddling close to the matriarch. Wishing that she had someone that she could truly confide in. Contemplating the seemingly impossible task that she had just been given.

She had to convince a group of privileged and set in their ways old asari to actually make a move against the Justicar Order. An order that possessed the most skilled, powerful, famous, and respected warriors the asari people had. Figuring out a way to marshal their resources into a killing blow against these legendary warriors.

And she had to do all this in less than half a year.

"I'm screwed." Tela Vasir moaned to the universe at large.

****APUFMKII****

Author's Note:

aDarkOne here:

The theme of this chapter is probably hubris. All the factions are making plans, and cutting deals, based on the premise that they understand their enemies and rivals, and are smarter than pretty much everybody else.

But most of them will be disappointed :)

I think that one of the reasons that I created Rayna Cardiga and Michael Smith was just to have a few relatively ordinary honest characters for people to identify with. Rayna and Michael provide an Everyman POV in a galaxy full of liars and schemers.

Follower38:

With this chapter, we have expanded to beyond just the few Superpowers and their point of view. Now the unofficial Superpowers have now made an appearance: The Queen of the Terminus, and the Shadow Broker. I've gotten some reviews that this story is

increasingly negative, well, this just how I thought the story would go, considering all the animosity from the wars. I'm pulling from real-world examples as well when I write, specifically the United States after Pearl Harbor and 9/11.

But moving on, we are still stepping things up in this story, and needless to say, the Hegemony will soon learn just what killing a Spartan means. And yes people, you read that right. Maccabeus of Dosiad. The Jiralhanae. If you thought the Salarians were bad for messing with the Yahg...

As always, please leave a review. :) On a sidenote: APUFMKII is now 15th for highest number of reviews in the Halo/Mass Effect crossover category. Let's try to get it even higher now!

32. Civil War: Resurgence

Alternate Past Uncertain Future Mk II

Chapter 32

"Confront them with annihilation, and they will then survive; plunge them into a deadly situation, and they will then live. When people fall into danger, they are then able to strive for victory."

-Sun Tzu, The Art of War

Resurgence

If one were to compare the space and worlds scattered throughout the Hegemony between now and only a month ago, there would be a startlingly contrast. Security had always been tight throughout the territory of the Batarian Hegemony but now there seemed to be police and soldiers stationed everywhere. The Hegemony had closed its borders off entirely to non-military traffic and was tightly monitoring virtually everyone who entered or left its space. Trying to completely isolate the Rebellion and cut all outside aid. It was nothing short of a self-imposed blockade.

Cutting off all trade with its neighbors had the Hegemony spending more on security than ever before. In all likelihood, the expenditure would possibly have plunged the Hegemony economy into a recession or outright depression, if not for support from the Council Races. The Asari Republics in particular were transferring an exorbitant amount of economic aid to the batarian government. Leaving Datak Korra's regime free to focus on the eliminating the Rebellion.

An opportunity that the High Admiral, now the Supreme Chancellor a newly created officer and title, was exploiting to the utmost. Factories, personnel, even the entire bureaucracy was almost dedicated purely to searching for, locating, and destroying the Rebels. And it was working. With no one or nothing to hinder or limit his actions and decisions, Korra was finally able to exercise the measures that he wanted since the Rebels proved themselves to be a credible threat.

Soldiers, law enforcement officers, the secret police and even civil service workers were all dedicated to rooting out and eliminating the Rebels. With the establishment of Martial Law, they had even greater

reign than before to do whatever they felt was necessary to acquire critical information. In the only a month, seventy-six rebel cells had been found and eliminated. With each cell consisting of anywhere from a dozen to several dozen people, that was hundreds of lives lost. Additionally, any and all Rebel sympathizers discovered had been executed as well, regardless if they had or had not aided the Rebels in any capacity whatsoever. Further raising the death toll from the mid-hundreds, to the low-thousands. And that was on Khar'shan alone.

Similar purges swept across the length and breadth of the entire Batarian domain. Rank and prestige no longer mattered. If you were a Rebel or sympathetic to their cause, you and your family would be executed, and all assets confiscated in the name of 'Galactic Security'.

Adding to this reign of terror, literally tens of thousands of 'suspected supporters' had been imprisoned by the Hegemony, with even more under observation. The number had risen so high and so quickly, that Korra had been forced to convert several of his large cargo ships into mobile prison barges. Imprisoning people had literally become a growth industry. Because imprisonment and execution was now a threat to everybody who showed the slightest hint of disloyalty to the new regime.

The message was clear to all who could see it: Datak Korra was no longer playing around.

Ironically, to those loyal to the Hegemony and its leader, life had never been better. With no squabbling politicians vying for power at the cost of its citizens, funds that once been filled the pockets of embezzlers, were now filling the pockets of the people. The quality of life having risen dramatically with their new found wealth, many were more than willing to allow and even support the Supreme Chancellor in his endeavors, whatever they may be.

Gorik Vekn was one of these eager loyal supporters. One of many new fresh recruits in the batarian military, he had just recently finished his Basic training. For Gorik, he was following a long-time tradition, having come from a family that had been serving in the Hegemony's armed forces for generations. His father had even served under Korra during the Chancellor's early days when both served in the Terminus systems. His father had nothing but the highest praise and respect for his former commanding officer. And had could not have been more pleased when Gorik had told him just why he was signing on with the Hegemony Army.

His father had even offered to pull a few ancient strings if he wanted, which Gorik promptly rejected. Saying he wanted to rise on his own merits, instead of riding on his family's coattails. It was that reason why the latest heir to a long-time legacy was working as a lowly private taking inventory at one of the Hegemony many, newly built, military bases. Or least, he was trying to. "Blast it all, I know I'm the FNG, but why am I the one cleaning up this mess?" The mess in question was the disorganized way that the bases ammunition had been stored.

Considering that almost all of the ammunition in question was just solid blocks of metal, there wasn't much of a hazard. But if you wanted to find a specific type of block for a specific weapon, it was

an adventure and a half trying to find it. Even as he went about the task of organizing the disaster that was the ammunition stores, Garik couldn't help but constantly glance at the rest of the military base.

The solid metal walls were thick and featureless, security cameras were everywhere, most of them installed after martial law was declared), guards seemed to be posted at every corner, and most of the equipment seemed relatively new and well maintained. This was a far cry from the rather laid back atmosphere that had existed at the base until recently. The new spirit of efficiency and professionalism coming about as a result of martial law.

Of course the fact that the High Admiral himself was coming to the base for an inspection was making everybody try to look their best too. "And of course the big heads can't afford to look incompetent, so they sacrifice me for their egos!" Garik muttered under his breath.

"Yes, that always does appear to be the case, doesn't it? Throwing away lives for the sake of one's ego." A voice suddenly said from behind him.

"Thank the Lords, someone agrees with me." Garik said as he turned, only to nearly soil himself as he saw just WHO had spoken to him. "Supreme Chancellor, sir!" Immediately he snapped off a crisp salute, holding in place even as Korra chuckled at the reaction.

"At ease," Korra looked for the ranking insignia on Garik's uniform. "Private Garik." Garik moved to parade rest, and despite his somewhat calm exterior, inside he was ecstatic. Never did he believe that for a moment, he would see the batarian in person, let alone speak to him personally. In the young soldier's mind, Korra was the one would bring the Batarian Hegemony back to its former glory and more than likely, far beyond it. "What were you griping about with so much vitriol?"

"Uh, the ammo stores, sir. Specifically how they were arranged." Garik supplied. "I don't know who was in charge of it before I was sir, but whoever they are, were either utterly incompetent or trying to sabotage us. I was reorganizing it when you came along, sir."

"Hmmm...I will look into that." Korra said thoughtfully. While most people in his position would consider something like the ammunition stores beneath their notice, Korra thought that incompetence and slothism in the armed forces could not be tolerated and should be rooted out whenever possible.

"Continue the good work soldier. With men like you, our victory over the traitorous rebels is inevitable." Datak told Garik Vekn as he put a reassuring hand on the young private's soldier.

"Yes sir!" Garik said enthusiastically, overjoyed that the leader of the Hegemony actually cared about his problems.

But to a large extent it didn't matter whether or not Datak Korra was sincere. Because there were many batarians just like Garik Vekn. All invested in the system, loyal to the Hegemony, and willing to fight for both. Such people would gladly fight and destroy the Rebellion

for Korra, and he intended to see that he did just that.

****APUFMKII****

On the other side of the tarnished coin though, it seemed as though the end days had come for the Rebels. In the eyes of many, their vaunted leader and her human allies had abandoned them. Betrayed them. Fleeing the fight just when they needed her most.

The jubilation and excitement gained from dealing such a heavy blow against the Hegemony the previous month had long since turned to dust and ash. Because the government's counter attack had been harsher than any of them imagined.

The government had always treated slaves and the low castes with extreme callousness and brutality, but the Hegemony had at least treated its middle class with a degree of restraint and moderation. But in the wake of Datak Korra declaring martial law such restraint was only a memory.

Now anyone suspected of sympathizing with the rebels was imprisoned or killed. Leaving the rebels dangerously short of potential recruits and allies. Because they those who might, secretly, sympathize with them were afraid of coming under suspicion. And this time, no one was off-limits from the Hegemony's iron grip and sweeping policies. The rich and powerful were seen with the same scrutiny as the average citizen. If any who were part of the former were suspected of aiding the Rebellion, their families would soon find themselves under investigation. If even one of the family was found to be guilty, they all quickly found themselves stripped of their titles and their wealth, then thrown together with others who had been condemned as Rebel allies.

Needless to say, in the wake of the first families to find themselves subjected to such punishment, many others had quickly sought out and purged any sympathizers within their own families before the Hegemony could do it for them. To the surprise of many, Rebel and Hegemony alike, there had been many rebel sympathizers within the highest tiers Hegemony society. Hundreds, almost a thousand batarians were discovered by their families to have surreptitiously aided the Rebellion in one form or another. These were primarily the youngest children of rich men, who were unlikely to see much of their parent's wealth, officials unlikely to rise any higher in the Hegemony hierarchy due to nepotism or their own incompetence, and other members of the elite who felt cheated by the status quo. Seeing the Rebellion as their best chance to destroy the system that they had come to hate. In the wake of the crackdown many of these elite sympathizers had been killed or captured, but a large number had managed to escape. Escape to where though, was unknown, as they had been seen since they left their homes and families.

Of course, none of this helped or comforted the Rebels still alive and kicking in the Hegemony, especially not those on Khar'shan. Those on the Capital world had been hit the hardest of the entire Rebellion across the numerous planets under Hegemony control. Even after the pyrrhic victory, with the death of the President and the Senate, the Khar'Shan Rebellion was the largest. Now it had been systemically reduced to less than a shadow of its former self.

One of the few rebels cells that had been able to survive against the odds was known simply as The Rabbit. The Rabbit had the distinction of being the only rebel cell to save a Spartan by wiping out a squad of asari commandos. They had staged numerous raids against Hegemony soldiers, and later turian troops, since then. Becoming perhaps the best known and most successful rebel cell on Kar'Shan, that didn't include a Spartan. Infamous for their fast hit and run tactics, emulating the Spartan that they had saved, Kelly-087, who they adopted as a sort of unofficial mascot.

However that very success had made them a priority target. Now over a hundred batarian soldiers and turian troops were searching through the rundown Nirvana neighborhood where Rabbit resided. Unfortunately there was also an elite squad of asari commandos looking for Rabbit too.

The regular troops simply couldn't catch up with the Rabbit cell, as all of its members were effectively built for speed. Recruiting only people who could fight well on the run and only using weapons that they could easily carry. Moreover, many of them had grown up in Nirvana, and knew the slums better than the back of their hand. Exploiting every nook and cranny they could as they tried to escape Nirvana before the enemy army could corner them.

But the asari commandos were different. Their skillful use of biotics made the commandos fast and agile, and all of them had literally centuries of combat experience, especially their leader Eda Freja. A veteran commando of several centuries, she had been one of the few to fight against the humans and actually emerge victorious in every one of the few encounters she had. Granted that had just been two engagements during the short UNSC/Citadel war, considering that virtually every Council soldier that fought against the enemies was defeated, it was a boast that few could make. On top of that, she was among the strongest biotics in the Asari Commando Corps, being able to use some abilities thought reserved for Matriarchs, though very few were suitable for combat.

"One down." Eda Freja coolly informed her squad as she shot a member of Rabbit through the back of the knees as they chased the rabbits over the rooftops of the Nirvana neighborhood. The rebel falling to the ground with a scream.

Eda had been hoping that the other rebels would stop to help their fallen comrade. But they knew that they if tried to help their fellow rebel they would just die too. In fact, the crippled rebel shot himself in the head before any of the commandos could reach the former slave, in order to avoid capture and interrogation. Several of the Commandos suddenly found a new, if grudging, respect for these Rebels. Not many would kill themselves so easily to avoid capture and interrogation.

Three of the Commandos blasted forward at the Rebels in a flash, using their Biotic charges. The three aiming to snag a Rebel mid-jump and take them down, not allowing them a chance to kill themselves. Two of the Rebels dove sideways, straight into the streets far below. A wet SMACK sounding only seconds later. The third commando was luckier, successfully capturing her quarry. Shocked at how the rabbit grinned at her, instincts developed over centuries making her push the batarian male away moments before the grenade he had pushed down his shirt exploded, only a quickly raised biotic barrier saving the

commando in question from dying too.

'Fucking fanatics' Eda thought as watched another rebel kill himself. She wanted to catch as many members of the Rabbit cell alive for interrogation. Since Rabbit was known to associate directly with Spartans she was hoping that the info she could squeeze out of them would lead her directly to the rebel leadership, or at least to whatever Spartans were on Kar'Shan.

But the rabbits seemed to be thinking along similar lines. Knowing that they couldn't defeat the commandos and their allies cell was simply trying to escape. Even if the only way that they could escape capture was through death. Eda took a quick count of just how many of the once large cell were left and still running. "Seven...seven little vermin running for their lives. Run, children, run!" She whispered as she grabbed her gun and gave chase.

Two of the rebels suddenly stopped running away and took the offensive. Charging towards the asari commandos as they threw flashbang grenades at the the commandos. Hoping to blind the asari elite long enough to finish them off with more explosives or at least distract and occupy the commandos long enough for their comrades to escape.

"Pathetic." Freja said as she biotically threw the grenades back at the rebels just before they detonated. Blinding light and piercing noise assaulted the eyes and ears of the Rebels, stunning them and make them stumble from the pain. One of the blinded rebels stepped off the roof moments later. Killing himself either by accident or design, Eda wasn't sure, but either way, it was another potential prisoner lost.

The other one appeared to have some sort of heart attack. The apparently fit batarian female clutching her chest as she groaned and fell to the ground. Shuddering for a moment and then going still.

"Unbelievable" Eda muttered, feeling cheated that the rebel had apparently just died of shock. "Did they actually plan dying like this?" Still, to the Rebel's credit, the distraction did work. The five remaining survivors of the Rabbit cell were nowhere to be seen.

Which might have been enough to save them if the rabbits were JUST going up these particular commandos and the equipment they had on them. But Eda Freja always used every advantage that she could. The commandos ship was directly above them in orbit with its cameras pointed straight down, and a few quick commands on Freja's omnitool brought up footage from the ship showing just where the rebels had gone.

"They went in there" Eda told her squad as she pointed at the structure in question. Not wasting a moment, the commandos were rushing into the building. Quickly going from room to room, only to find the exhausted rebels hiding within the third door they broke down, a forgotten apartment. The survivors thinking that they had a moment to catch their breath.

Even exhausted, the survivors proved why they were among the best of their peers. Their weapons snapping up and into position despite

their exhaustion, creating a funnel of death as they opened fire on the commandos. Every shot that made contact was stopped cold by powerful biotic barriers, but it had the desired effect of forcing the commandos away from the door.

But they were not about to allow five suicidal Rebels stop them from getting their hands on a living Spartan. Copying the Rabbits' own earlier tactics, the commandos threw flashbang grenades, but this time there was no one that could throw the grenades back. The tremendous flash of light and sound blinded and deafened all the rebels. Leaving them vulnerable and cornered before the commandos.

Not allowing the Rebels a chance to recover, the commandos rushed in. Some using biotics to knock down the Rebels and pull the weapons from their hands, others tackling them and pinning them to the ground. One even using an Overload from their Omnitool as a taser on one of the Rebels. In less than five seconds, the five survivors had all been disarmed, pinned or otherwise captured.

"You may have defeated us but you can't keep the Hegemony alive forever bitch!" the apparent leader swore as restraints were placed on his wrists. Staring blearily at Eda Freja as she restrained him.

"You're probably right four-eyes" Eda said with casual racism as she glowered down at the relatively short batarian male.

"But I'm not here for the Hegemony I am here for the apes from Earth who have been killing my sisters and you're going to tell me all you know about them" the asari commando continued with a sneer.

The batarian spat at the commando, a mess of snot and spit splattering against the Commando's leg. "Go ahead and try, whore. We'll all die before we betray our Lady." Referring to the Spartan they had modelled themselves after. "Death, is infinitely preferable to betrayal."

"I think its cute that you seem to believe that you have a choice" Eda mocked the man as two of her commandos held him still. Placing her hands on either side of his face as she murmured "Embrace Eternity."

Most non-asari viewed their Melding ability as a kind of mind-sex, and considering that that was how the asari reproduced there was a great deal of truth to that stereotype. But Melding could be used for more than breeding, pleasure, and intimacy. It was a true joining of two minds, and exceptionally powerful, ruthless, and skilled asari could use to it plunder the secrets from the unwilling. As far as the asari knew, only another asari of greater will than the aggressor could resist it.

It was also highly taboo in Asari culture. Such a use of Melding was the ultimate violation of one's sanctity and privacy. To use it was to make oneself a pariah in the eyes of most asari. If one was caught doing so in the Asari Republics, it was an automatic death sentence.

But there are always exceptions.

Eda Freja and her squad often operated outside asari space, and quite frequently went on priority missions with and/or for Spectres and other VIPs. As long as Eda and her squad continued to get results nobody really questioned their methods.

The cell leader tried to resist, but though his will was strong, he had absolutely no experience in this kind of mental combat. Leaving him all too vulnerable to an asari just entering her matriarch phase. Simultaneously screaming and crying as Eda tore through his mind looking for everything that he knew about Spartans. Uncaring of the fact that she was doing him permanent neurological damage in the process. Crying out as what felt like invisible claws ripped at things that were never meant to be touched.

Less than a minute after she started Eda let go of the shuddering husk of what had once been a proud batarian male. Looking down at the rabbit with contempt. Then turning to her 'girls' as she grinned and announced "I have our next lead."

****APUFMKII****

Spartan John-117. The man had as many titles as he had medals. The Master Chief. Captain-Commander. Spartan-King. Demon. Monster. Dog of ONI. Protector of Humanity. He and the rest of the Spartans were made for. He still recalled the first time his 'Mother', Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey had addressed him and the other Spartans. "_You have been called upon to serve, you will be trained... and you will become the best we can make of you. You will be the protectors of Earth and all her colonies..."_

And they were. First fighting against what would be come to be called 'The First Insurrection'. Fighting humanity's enemies from within to protect the society and civilization that they had worked so hard to create. A society that had spanned dozens, if not a hundred worlds. Then, the Great War; humanity fighting for its very right to exist as a species. More than a decade of endless war, battle after battle, loss after loss. John and his Spartans doing all they can to buy humanity time to survive.

Yet, in all that time, there was one enemy that John never imagined that he would be fighting. One that was inevitable and unbeatable as time itself: the Bureaucracy. The leader of the Spartans was in his office, another new addition to his life since his promotion to Captain-Commander of the Spartans. And with that new position and rank, came all the responsibilities given to those who command.

And as the field commander of Operation Spartacus, it meant that, now that he was back at Reach, he was being given all the reports that ONI either received or gathered themselves regarding the Hegemony, more specifically, the Rebellion. And the news was anything but good.

High Admiral, or Supreme Chancellor as he was now calling himself, Datak Korra was now the virtual dictator of the Batarian Hegemony. Aggressively using his newfound authority to not merely hunt down the rebels, but to also deny them any allies or resources. By closing the borders of the Hegemony, imprisoning or killing any suspected rebel sympathizers, purge the Hegemony of corruption, and receiving an ever larger amount of Council aid in order to help do any of these things.

This was making it harder and harder get any intel from members of the Rebellion. Nevertheless what they they were getting showed that the situation was worsening, especially on Kar'Shan itself. Somewhere between 50 to 70 percent of the rebels on the batarian homeworld had been wiped out, and the rebellion no longer had any foothold in Overseer City. In short, if Jella and Cara didn't return soon, the Rebellion would die.

And that was only matters off-world. There were as many domestic issues revolving around the Spartans as well. First and Foremost was Sigma company, Gray Team's company. With the loss of the three Spartans, the infiltration and operator company was leaderless. Like all the other Companies, the Spartan-IIs in charge were connected to their subordinates. John would now need to search through Gray Team's notes to see if they had any potential successors among the company. Until then, Fred-108 had taken command of Sigma.

Like Sigma, the loss of four Spartan-IIs had hit the remaining S-IIs hard. Their numbers had always been small even before their augmentations, half of which 'washed out' from it. Their bodies not taking the augmentations well. The Insurrection, the Great War and Heretic Wars only whittling down their numbers bit by bit. None of them expected this: two of their siblings were dead after a single battle, with another two missing and one of those presumed dead.

Now, after reading every the reports on the Rebellion, John knew that even more of his Spartans were going to be needed, and by extension, some of them were going to die. Of course plenty of Spartans had died fighting the Covenant, but this was different.

Now the Spartans were not fighting to defend humanity itself, as they had been in the war against the Covenant, or even just to preserve human unity, as they had been during the First and Second Insurrection. Instead they were fighting to manipulate alien politics and advance the UNSC's geo-political position. When John thought of it that ONI, he had to wonder if he was still ONI's dog, although the term 'bitch' might be more appropriate.

As he contemplated the justification for the Operation, Hood's question came to mind; "Is it worth it?" He wasn't lying entirely when he told the Admiral that he wasn't sure. But as the prices his Spartans paid came to mind, two of which were still undergoing both mental and physical therapy for their injuries, that feeling had started to change. Why had he even agreed to this? He could have just sent the ODSs instead of his Spartans probably, or least supplemented his numbers. But then, how of those lives would have been lost? More importantly, now that the Hegemony was no longer holding back, at all, just how much more will his Spartans have to sacrifice for the Rebellion?

As though the universe were answering his question, the door to his office. His eyes didn't leave his paperwork as he heard, "John, you okay?" Looking up, he found himself looking at his 'sister', Kelly-087. Since her return to Reach, she had been pulled off of field duty, instead taking up John's duties while he was away. Physically she was all but recovered, but the attack on her nervous system had left her with permanent random nerve spasms. Considering the nature of the MJOLNIR armor converting thought to action, this

was potentially fatal.

"I'm fine, Kelly." He tried to hide his unease, but all of the Spartan-IIs had grown up with one another. Kelly could easily sense his unhappiness. Although Spartans were often seen as cold-blooded if not outright robotic by outsiders, this was to a certain extent a facade, and amongst those they considered comrades there were strong ties of brotherhood, compelling her to say, "No you're not. Now are you going to tell me what's wrong or continue brooding?"

John sighed, admonishing himself for forgetting that this was Kelly he was talking too. Even amongst his 'siblings' she was more intune with other people's emotions. Instead of answering verbally, he just tossed a datapad with ONI's latest report at her. Kelly deftly caught the datapad and started reading without any sort of preamble. "This what you're worried about?" She asked with surprise, more than a small amount of disappointment. "John, you expected this to happen at some point. You told me that when we first linked-up on Khar'Shan."

John didn't pick his eyes off of the fresh datapad that he was reading. "I expected for them step up, and for some of us to die, yes. But not like this. Not so many of us, and so quickly."

"Then you were being naive John. We certainly never held back when fighting against the Insurrection" Kelly pointed out.

"Yet, this Hegemony has killed Gray Team." John countered. "Three Spartans who spent the better part of the Great War behind enemy lines. Without any support beyond what they could muster up themselves, or any means to return to friendly lines. And this was before the Hegemony's escalation." Before Kelly could refute the point, he added, "I know that we can win this...Rebellion," He refused to call it an Insurrection, in light of why he was made, "but what am I going to have ask, no, order of my Spartans to attain it?"

"Nothing they wouldn't do willing John." Kelly answered with absolute conviction. "We were remade to fight for humanity and its too not for any of us to try to be something else now."

"But Operation Spartacus isn't about fighting to defend humanity its about influencing alien politics." John argued. "We are creating an Insurrection."

"So what? If Spartacus succeeds humanity will be strong and safer and that's good enough for me" Kelly replied. "If you're worried about losing people, John, you need to consider this: we either die fighting on their world, ending their regime. Or on our soils when they go to war with the UNSC." As though knowing what John was about to ask, she continued, "We're all willing to sacrifice whatever it takes John, to win this. You want to know why that is?"

"And why is that?"

"Because you're John-117. Blue Leader. Captain-Commander of the Spartans." She reminded him. "You kept us all alive through the wars. We trust you to see this through. Andâ€¦" She rubbed the back of her neck, where it met her skull, the source of her spasms. "We trust you not waste our sacrifices."

John was touched by the trust she was showing in him. The gesture lifting him out of his depression and helping him focus on the mission at hand. Prompting him to ask, "Then how do you think that we should respond to this?"

"Hard, and heavy." She answered, traces of anger and a desire for revenge lacing her words. "You created a Rebellion, John, but they made this into a war. I think it's time we fought like it." Taking the datapad John had given her, she tapped it several times. "We've got a few new classes of Spartan-IVs graduating now, with MJOLNIR. Why not use them?"

The Spartan-Commander considered the idea. The fact of the matter was that they needed some sort of game-changer to keep the Rebellion alive. The Spartan IVs might give them the edge they needed.

"Yes that could work" John said thoughtfully. "Are there any that you would suggest?" While the S-IIIs were hesitant regarding the S-IVs and their combat skills, considering they were cross-trained, instead of brought up from childhood like their predecessors, they were more than willing to trust them. If, seeing them as still 'green'. If Kelly suggested them, that meant she thought that there some more than ready for a real battlefield.

"Some." She finally handed back the datapad. "Quite a few of the new graduates actually. And there's one fireteam in particular. I think you should take a look at their squad classification."

Taking the offered datapad, he scrolled down the squad names, searching for the one Kelly had marked out. When he found it, he nodded in appreciation. Only for his eyes to widen when he read their classification. "Is this right?" He all but demanded, Kelly giving an affirmative nod. "Are they on station?" Another nod. "Show me." Kelly just gave a smile and waved for her 'brother' to follow.

As the doors shut behind John, the datapad was still active. Open to the Fireteam Kelly had marked. At the top, their name: 'Fireteam Crimson'. Directly beneath it, four names were listed, with their skills, ranks and achievements listed beneath them. At the bottom of the page, in great big bold letters read: "Suggested reclassification from fireteam to 'Hyper-Lethal Vector'."

****APUFMKII****

Datak Korra was unquestionably the most powerful batarian alive. But Jella Korragan was arguably even more influential. Thanks to the part she had played in starting the Batarian Civil War. However, this pivotal figure was currently nowhere near batarian space. During the Great War, a mobile battlefield hospital was made from two repair and refit platforms, the UNSC Hopeful. In the time since, several more were made in its image, of varying sizes.

The smallest of which, and incidentally where Jella was currently recovering, was the UNSC Caregiver. Only as large as frigate, it was currently parked over Reach, serving its purpose and a new temporary role: a high security hospital. Keeping its occupants locked up tight while providing them the finest medical attention the UNSC could afford. An oxymoron if there ever was one.

Although she had not been wounded, Cara T'Val was also there. Even though she was critically injured, the strong willed Jella had still managed to coerce the ONI agents, who had smuggled her and John Doe out of batarian space, into taking her asari lover too. When Cara had refused to leave out the orphans she had informally adopted, the ONI agents had brought them along too just to end the argument. Rationalizing that Jella was more likely to recover with her friends and family around to provide morale support, unwilling to admit to themselves or their superiors that they had given in just because an alien female too weak to stand wouldn't stop yelling at them.

Of course, that did not mean the UNSC was going to bend over and give them everything they asked for. ONI had requisitioned the UNSC Caregiver so that while Jella was getting the best care possible, they would not risk any UNSC secrets or knowledge, whatever it be may be, leaving with aliens.

That did not mean however, they had free-run through the ship. Guards were posted through what were considered 'sensitive' areas of the ship to prevent Cara, Jella or the kids from accessing them. For them, this meant anywhere outside of the cafeteria, lavatories, hallways and their rooms. The xenophobia that humanity felt was still strong, and in the case of their 'guests', it meant paranoia in their handling.

Jella recalled what John had told her of Humanity's xenophobia because of the Great War, and Cara knew of it from the short-lived UNSC/Council war. And for the most part, it proved to be true. Unless it was necessary, the humans aboard gave Jella and Cara a wide berth. Keeping them at more than arm's length. Ironically enough, it was not as bad as Jella or Cara had expected it to be. She had expected outright hostility at the very least, and at worst, someone actually trying to kill her simply because she wasn't human.

While ONI was temporarily in charge of the ship, they were not the ones who were crewing the vessel, not entirely. The guards and crew were a mix of ONI, the normal crew, and Spartans. And among those people, there were some that were not like their peers. The asari orphan in particular seemed to garner a lot of sympathy from the female crew.

Little Agata Fulvia had been born into slavery, and was shy, quiet, and meek. Although her last owners had treated her more like a daughter than a slave, buying her to serve as a playmate, friend, and companion to their own young child, she had learned prior to that that those with authority could use and abuse you however they liked. As a result, she was pitifully grateful for any kindness shown to her by the obviously powerful humans.

The batarian child, Ilona Alfwin, was a different matter though. Her four eyes alone made it quite apparent that she was not human, unlike her adopted sister Agata, who except for her blue skin could pass for a human, at a distance. Making the humans aboard The Caregiver naturally less sympathetic towards Alfwin.

Moreover, Ilona was a child of privilege. Before her parents had died, Alfwin was the one that adults had doted on and spoiled. Now the roles were reversed, and to a child already traumatized by watching her mother murdered before her eyes it was a very unpleasant surprise.

Of course that didn't mean that Ilona wanted everything that Agata got. When Cara, Ilona, and Agata came aboard The Caregiver they had all been subjected to medical exams. Supposedly to make sure that they were in good health and prevent them from bringing any dangerous diseases on board. But whereas Ilona's examine had been relatively short and straightforward, the two asari had been subjected to an intense battery of tests.

Blood tests, skin or rather scale samples. Spending hours in what the humans called MRI machine. The MRI was rather pleasant but the humans began to worry when the entire machine began to levitate. The EKG tickled a bit and the lie detector began to smoke. At a certain point, ONI had decided that the more...invasive examinations were no longer feasible. In the interest of cost-to-benefit ratios. Aside from those, they constantly had Cara both explaining and demonstrating her biotic abilities. While Cara did not mind answering the questions to a certain point, the constant use of her biotics was exhausting for her, among asari, she was considered to be weaker than average.

Still, she considered it to be more than a fair price for all the medical attention that Jella was receiving.

It was only when they started prying at Agata to show off her biotics, that Cara actually put her foot down. And by put her foot down, lifted everything within a ten-meter radius that was not bolted to the floor and stuck them, doctors and guards included, to the ceiling. The ONI doctors had quickly submitted after that and ended most of their tests. Something Cara was grateful for as her little display of biotic power only lasted for a moment.

The only things they had done afterwards was simply peppering her with questions. Until they approached the topic of Melding. Cara was more than willing, if a bit embarrassed, to share everything she knew about the Melding. When they asked her if she could demonstrate it on someone, she only demanded two things. The first was that she had the finally say in who she melded with. The second, was they did NOT even dare to approach Agata about the subject. Melding was considered to be an intimate act, even when used for other purposes as it was literally a sharing of the minds. In Cara's mind, anyone asking an asari child to Meld with them was little more than a pedophile.

This left the scientists in a bit of a bind. Because while they DID want to observe asari Melding in action, they did not want any human on The Caregiver subjected to it, since ONI, and for that matter the UNSC, did not want the asari learning any more of their secrets. They had hoped that they could observe Cara Melding with the children, but as she explained loudly and in great detail, from her POV merely suggesting it was both perverted and disgusting.

Since then, the ONI scientists had largely left Cara and the kids alone. Having been told by their superiors to stop upsetting T'Val. Now Cara was watching a hardened and battle scarred female ODSM smile indulgently as she gave candy Agata, who happily munched it down. The only problem with the scene, as far as Cara was concerned, was that the woman seemed to be completely ignoring Ilona. And she wasn't the first, and Cara doubted would be the last. Yes, a few were showing both the children the same treatment, but there was a clear favoritism being shown by the humans willing to treat with

them.

What Cara did not notice however, was the rift that had appeared and now was slowly growing with each passing day that she and her lover were here. A rift between those who were willing to show a public kindness to the non-humans, and those who were not. It did not matter if they were one of the elite ODSs, an engineer or even a Spartan-IV. While nothing overt had occurred, those who showed kindness were slowly ostracized by their peers. Their disapproval apparent. This leading to most willing to show such kindness to do more covertly.

"I think Ilona would like some candy too." Cara told the female soldier.

"Sorry but I'm all out." The ODS replied. Seeing the skeptical look, she added, "Look, it was hard enough getting just that one out of the mess hall alright. This is a military hospital ship, so it isn't like there are vending machines onboard."

"Ilona why don't you go play that video game they gave us that you like? the one where you can be a Sith Knight fighting the evil Jedi Lords" said Cara, who hadn't really paid much attention to the game, but knew that the batarian child seemed to like enjoy it. Happily smiling at Cara, Ilona ran off, her sister running off after her.

Once they were out of sight, Cara told the female marine "I know batarians are ugly by human standards but that's no reason to ignore and be mean to her. Ilona's just a child she can't help the way goddess made her."

"And I was joking about the candy bar." The ODS shot back. "I don't know if you've noticed, but people don't really like aliens here. The fact that you and your kid at least LOOK like US helps. But don't expect me to be lovy-dovy to the four eyes."

"Its the least you can do considering the fact that you're pushing people like Jella to fight the Hegemony for you! Do you have ANY IDEA what they batarian government does to rebels they catch!" Cara shot back.

"Look, I know that you think you lived a shitty life." The ODS started, pulling out a knife, one as long as Cara's hand, and started juggling it. "But you don't get to bitch about what we do here. We could have just said 'fuck it' and nuked the 'Hergemon' until they decided to surrender. You should be grateful that we're even doing this." She pulled a second knife and started juggling them both with practiced ease.

Before the batarian slavers captured her Cara probably would have been too intimidated in a situation like this to continue speaking. But what she had gone through since then had forced her to mature and harden a great deal. So simply said "humanity isn't all powerful and even if it was that's no reason to be mean to a child."

Then she walked away as quickly as she could while still maintaining some dignity. Unnerved by the way that the ODS looked at her and smiled while handling her knives. Deciding that there was nothing better to do, she decided to head back to Jella's room. Perhaps she

could talk with her about this issue with the humans.

As the door opened, a smile on her face, called out, "Hey love, how-" She cut herself off as she realized that her loved was not alone in her room. "Hello, John!" The Spartan, out of armor and uniform gave her a curt nod. The metal eye-patch standing out even more than usual as it was now embedded into his very skin, grey metal in the place of a pupil, with circuit-like patterns around the eye. "What's going on?"

Jella gave a look of concern at John, who simply nodded. "We'll continue this discussion later then. Inform a Spartan when you are ready, but we will be heading out soon." Giving Cara another nod, the Spartan showed himself out, leaving in his wake an uneasy silence.

For a moment, there was nothing as the two lovers just gazed at each other. Neither offering any words until Cara decided to break the silence. "What's going on? Why was he here?"

Jella didn't say anything, only sighing as she looked at her blankets. "It's, John just told me that we need to return to the Hegemony soon, if we want there to be a Rebellion left when we get there."

"When do we need to leave?" Cara asked, hoping that they could leave Ilona and Agata somewhere safe before heading into danger again.

"I am going to be leaving as soon my injuries are all healed, or even before then." Jella said, emphasizing the pronoun. "YOU are going to be staying here with the children. John's promised me your safety and protection until it's all over."

"Are you...breaking up with me?" Cara asked in shock.

"No, no no!" Jella frantically waved her hands in denial. "Nothing like that at all, Cara. It's just...John has told me what's going on in the Hegemony right now. Korra has established Martial law, and the last time we fought the Hegemony!" He told me that the entire Hegemony is going to become a warzone soon. And I don't want you or the kids in the middle of that." This only part of the truth. The other part of it was that with Cara there, Jella would finally be able to cut loose again. She had been moderating herself since she rescued her lover, if only for her sake and her innocence.

Cara felt conflicted. She did not want to be separated from her lover. Especially since she knew, via their Melding, that she was the only one Jella considered a true friend. But the children that she was increasingly coming to think of as HER kids needed Cara too.

Besides Cara didn't really enjoy fighting and killing. It would be nice to continue resting and recovering somewhere safe. But then she remembered her recent conversation with female marine.

"We can't send the kids back into a warzone BUT will we really be safe here? these people don't like non-humans" Cara said slowly.

For once, Jella actually smiled. "John promised me that his Spartans will be the ones watching you and the kids. While they might not like

us, they'll be professional with us at least. And I trust him." Cara was surprised by what her lover said. Jella, as a whole, never really trusted anyone. While she did put an effective facade that convinced people that she did trust them, when it came down to it, no one really knew the Rebellion leader. Not her past, her preferences or even her birthday. For her to say that she trusted someone spoke volumes.

"But will YOU be okay Jella?" Cara asked, knowing how alone the rebel leader would be without her asari lover by her side.

"I'm not going back alone, and neither is John. He said that the UNSC is taking this seriously now. And he's left behind an insurance policy as well, just in case." She pointed out a large crate in the corner of the room that Cara hadn't noticed early. Probably because her attention was focused on John and then her lover. Walking over towards it, the asari reached down and opened up the crate. With a hiss of pressured air, she pulled up the lid revealing an ODST Battle Dress Uniform(BDU). A full-suit of armor. While Cara was nearly gaping at the pristine suit of armor, Jella explained, "John said that was the top of the line armor back when they fought the Covenant. Said that it should protect me from most anything a Hegemony soldier can carry. And there's something else as well. Grab me one of those gray bands. They're at the left."

Searching for said band, she found them. Three of them to be exact. Picking up one of them, Cara brought it over to her lover. "What is this?"

"There should be two buttons on it, press the larger one."

Cara hesitantly fumbled with the device for a moment. Figuring out that she was supposed to put it on her forearm. Touching the large button a moment later, exclaiming in surprise as it what looked like a giant purple plate suddenly appeared on her arm. Covering her like the sort of primitive shield her ancestors had used before the asari had developed firearms.

"It's a Kig-Yar point-defense gauntlet." Jella explained, a massive grin just plastered on her face. "That's what John said it was called. Apparently it's Covenant technology. Stronger than even their full-body shields but completely inflexible. Bullets just bounce off it, unless its a heavy caliber weapon. And even then, they don't penetrate. Only thing that can shut it off, without hitting the smaller button, is a plasma weapon or the user dying."

"At least you will have some decent protection this time" Cara said. Feeling an odd impulse to touch the energy barrier. But wisely ignoring it as she shut the device off.

"I'm still worried about being the only non-humans in the System though...what if they decide to use us for sick experiments or try to just push us out an airlock because they think that they don't need us anymore?" Cara asked, remembering how the ONI scientists had badgered poor little Agata almost to the point of tears, and then suggested that Cara Meld with the the little girl while they watched.

"Even if they do, the Spartans won't." Jella tried to comfort. "John promised me that, no matter their personal feelings, they will follow

his orders. They might be rude, but they won't try to murder you in your sleep." Despite the conviction in her words, and her faith in John, there still was a sliver of doubt when it came to how Cara and the kids would be treated once she left. "If you want him to make the promise to you as well, I'll ask him."

"That would make me feel better" Cara admitted. Adding a moment later "but I also want to know how you are...I realize contacting me when you're in the Hegemony would probably be impossible or put you in danger but I at least want to know as much as these armchair generals do."

Cara had nothing but contempt for the Hegemony. However she didn't have much respect for ONI either. Recognizing that the covert ops group was using others, such as her and Jella, to fight and die against potential enemies/rivals like the Hegemony so that humans wouldn't have to.

"Again, I'll have to talk to John about. He has a lot of pull around here, from what I've seen. Even baldy stopped and saluted him when he was here." Referring to one of the guards who had gone out of his way to try and make Jella and Cara's life hell, only to be stopped because of Jella's Spartan guards.

Cara felt a small spark of jealousy at how Jella kept praising John. The Spartan had never shown the slightest sign of interest in romance or sex, but the asari couldn't help but remember how Jella had described John as the only male that she would ever consider inviting to her bed.

The batarian sensed what was bothering her lover. Having gotten to know Cara pretty well during their time together. Prompting her to say "Hey don't worry about John...all these humans think batarians are ugly besides...I'm pretty sure that the male Spartans all have their manhoods cut off to make room for more weapons."

Both the alien women laughed at that. Enjoying a chance to mock the human warriors that all seemed to look down on them. Cara moving to hug her lover when she stopped laughing.

Cara passionately kissed her lover and then pulled her head away to say "if you really think that we will be safe I will stay...but you need to promise me that you will come back to me alive."

"I promise." Jella replied.

****APUFMKII****

High Admiral Datak Korra wasn't the kind to casually change his mind once he had made it up. But Datak was a pragmatist first and foremost, so in response to the increasing danger his regime faced from the humans the head of the Hegemony had given Enid Arash the go ahead to begin turning batarians into super soldiers, despite the fatal flaws in her process. Now he was at the headquarters for Project Golgatha, to witness some of these super soldiers in action for the first time.

Arash had said that they were ready for field-testing, but he wanted to see them in action off the battlefield first. Rather than just throwing them into action and hoping for the best. Currently, he was

watching them running around a built in track, about the length of a standard cruiser. They had only started a few minutes ago and already were half-way through their second lap. "As you can see, despite all the heavy equipment and cybernetics built into their bodies, these subjects are still faster than a non-augmented individual."

"Just how fast can they run?"

"Admittedly it varies per individual, the main factors being how healthy and how fit they already were prior to augmentation." Arash explained. "The weakest of the bunch is still capable at running at twice the speed of the average batarian soldier wearing a full-combat load. The few former-soldiers from our captives have clocked in at nearly five times the average. One of our earlier subjects was even faster, though she has since expired."

Despite his calm facade, Datak was mildly impressed. He had assumed that all the implants in their bodies would slow them down. He didn't expect to be so much faster. "This includes their reflexes?"

To his surprise, Arash shook her head, "No, I still am working on their cranial implants. The reaction time is half that of the norm, but based on what I've seen from the human super-soldiers, theirs are still faster." That got a frown from the former High Admiral, while the faster reaction time was great, if the Spartans were faster still...he didn't like it, but it was the best he could expect.

"What about their martial prowess? And their marksmanship?"

Arash gave him a feral grin in response. "Why don't you see for yourself?"

Project Golgatha's headquarters was built into a former Hegemony mining colony that the batarians had stripped of virtually all natural resources decades ago. The surface of the world was a barren wasteland but all the leftover underground tunnels gave the Arash and her people plenty of room to expand their operations. Room that they had used to build things like the arena that she took the admiral to. Giving Datak Korra his first opportunity to study the results of the Doctor's work up close. New construction to heavily reinforce and fortify the facility meant it's security was surpassed by few others facilities, such as Korra's own personal bunker.

The super soldiers were indeed massive and muscular, but they appeared far from the batarian ideal. Scars from recent surgeries crisscrossed their virtually naked bodies, and their obviously mechanical eyes glowed yellow. Most of them could not even be identified by gender, their genitals removed and some sort of metallic plate in their place. A device built directly their their backs was connected by a long tube to the back of their heads. Their bodies gently quivering as it pumped drugs straight into their brains. While their faces were oddly expressionless, making the soldiers appear as though they were asleep on their feet.

"You removed their eyes and genitalia?" Korra said mildly, but inside he was disgusted. Only a lifetime of military discipline allowing him to hold in his temper at seeing what the amoral scientist had done to loyal soldiers of the Hegemony.

"Well I need somewhere to place the piping for some of the implants. And it was not as though they were going to ever be using them again once I was done with them." Arash dismissed offhand. "It was either that or you had exposed components. And if you're worried about muscle atrophy or aggression, don't. They have small reservoirs for synthetic and more potent cocktails instead of the standard male hormones."

"This is an abomination." Korra said softly as he looked at the batarian soldiers that Arash had literally unmanned. Not sure if he was speaking to Arash, himself, or the universe at large.

"Hey, you wanted fast, you got fast." Arash reminded Korra. "I usually like my work to be more streamlined, but you asked for this."

"Is there any other way?"

Arash didn't answer right away. Instead, pulling up her omnitool, indecipherable scrawl began scrolling down the page Arash brought up. Only catching parts of sentences here and there at the speed she was scrolling. "...chemical-augmentorsâ€|" "...neural feedback failureâ€|" "...self-immolationâ€|", that was all he managed to read before Arash shut her tool down. "Depends, give me an unlimited budget and I'll develop something within the year. Maybe."

"We don't HAVE a year, the humans and their collaborators are already in the Hegemony." Korra point out.

"Well, then what you see is what you got." Arash waved towards the subjects. "Either I can keep making more, or this all you got while I try to make them better. I can't do both."

"Just start the demonstration." Datak said irritably.

With a smile, Enid just tapped her Omnitool again. With a shudder, one of the subjects suddenly started growling. Fluids flowing faster through the tube, their bodies trembling. The one raised their head but still obediently stayed in place. Across from them, a krogan was rudely shoved into the arena at gunpoint, roaring at his captors before turning back to the arena itself. It's eyes searching the room until it locked onto the now active subject.

The krogan in question was not one of their elite. He was a greedy fool who had tried to cheat a slaver when the slaver had a small army backing him up, losing his freedom as a result. He was a bully, murderer, rapist, and just under a century old. Just one of many cocky youths that dove into the Terminus in the hopes of either getting rich or becoming a conqueror. But he was still a krogan, so he should be more than a match for any batarian in hand to hand combat.

With a roar, the krogan charged forward. Slamming head first into the modified batarian , who impressively remained standing. The krogan began pummeling with its fists and headbutting with all its might, yet the subject did not get angry, attempt to dodge, or even wince in pain. The physical abuse from the much larger opponent having no apparent effect on the batarian.

"What's going on? Why is he just taking the hits?" Korra asked in

annoyance.

"Well I decided that, as powerful as these subjects may be, they can't be a loose cannon." Arash began to explain. "Before augmentation, we conditioned all of them to never act before they are ever given orders. Outside of certain necessities. I took pains to ensure that the condition remained firmly in place throughout and after the augmentation process."

"So until I order them to respondâ€|" Datak said thoughtfully.

"That subject will keep taking the hits until that krogan stops from pure exhaustion."

Korra felt conflicted. While it was good to have soldiers that were completely loyal and reliable, without intelligence and initiative troops couldn't see and take opportunities on the battlefield, or react in time when the odds turned against them. So every squad of these enhanced soldiers would need to be led by batarians who could still think for themselves.

"Enough of this. Show me what your creatures can DO Arash I'm tired of watching that krogan beast assault his betters." Korra commanded.

"Subject One: Kill the krogan in front of you." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, the Subject roared. Loud enough that the Krogan took several steps back instinctively. The subject didn't let it get much further than that, running forward, and punching the krogan with enough force to shatter ribs and knock the thug off his feet.

"What the hell are you four-eyes?" the krogan grunted as his batarian nemesis stalked forward.

To his shock the batarian actually grasped him by his hump and hurled the krogan across the arena. The wounded male hitting the floor with enough force to see stars. Getting to his feet just in time to meet the freakish batarian's next attack.

Not that it did any good. The next punch was delivered with all the batarian soldier's chemically and cybernetically enhanced might. Blood and ichor flying out the krogan's hump as the fist went straight through the ribcage and out the other side. The krogan, to his credit only growled and slammed his fist against the subject's head, trying to give it a concussion but the effort was in vain. As though realizing it's target was still alive, it pulled the arm out and grabbed hold of the krogan's skullplate, it's fingers digging in beneath it.

In the blink of an eye, the krogan went from a raging warrior, to a squealing pup as he vainly tried to pry the subject's fingers off his plate. The krogan started screaming as the subject started pulling, the plate rising centimeter by centimeter. With a wet squelch the batarian pulled the plate clean off, the krogan screaming at the top of his lungs. Even Korra grimacing at the sight as now, without the plate, the brain could be seen directly underneath, the skull only surrounding its sides.

But Datak did not have to endure the sight for long, because the

batarian soldier abruptly ended the fight by literally punching his vulnerable enemy in the brain. The krogan dropping with a shudder from the death blow. As soon as the krogan's body hit the ground, the subject stopped, returning to the state it was before being given its previous order.

"Impressive" Korra admitted. And he was being honest as well. It was the first time he had seen batarians successfully take on krogan without heavy weapons or considerable numbers on their side.

"Yes but these are just the first versions I'm sure that after a few more years of R&D I can do much better" Arash said with a smile.

"What are the conditions for them to respond to orders?" Korra asked, "Can any voice simply order them what to do?"

"Of course not!" Arash stepped back as though she had been slapped. "I am not an idiot. For the first several orders, a half dozen or so, they need to see the face and proper credentials of the one giving those orders. Those of proper rank can do so. Afterwards, they will respond to voice commands alone." "

"Commendable."

Arash's smile was swept aside just as quickly as it appeared. "Though, you didn't tell me which you were going to decide? Numbers, or better quality? I only have time to work on one or the other."

"Are your notes decipherable by another doctor?" Korra started, "Would it be possible for you to create a detailed walkthrough as to how to create more of these subjects? Quite simply, can you delegate another to do so?"

"Yes, but then-" Enid began, only for the Chancellor to speak over her.

"That's enough then. I expect the name of your chosen subordinate before the week is out, doctor." Glancing towards the remaining subjects, he added, "You will get the funds you requested, and continue with the development of the next generation of these subjects."

Korra knew that he needed these enhanced soldiers now but he refused to simply accept Arash's brutal methods as the status quo. Moreover, he was growing increasingly sick of the sociopathic Enid. Still, while he wanted her methods to change, he was pragmatic as well. His reports all told him that the humans super-soldiers were missing. The last sighting having been during the attack on the Presidential Palace. But he knew that this reprieve would not last, and when they returned, he would be ready for them.

****APUFMKII****

Sneaking into the Hegemony was much more difficult than sneaking out. Even before the attack on the Palace, Hegemony border security had tightened into a noose. Now, it was a stranglehold. The Hegemony had long since closed off its borders to virtually all incoming and outgoing traffic. And what ships were allowed over the borders were

closely monitored to ensure that everything was above the board. The slightest hint of suspicion meant the offending ship was either pulled aside and boarded, or annihilated by a pack of cruisers. But the sheer length and breadth of the entire Hegemony, with all its Mass Relays, meant that the Hegemony's navy could not be in every place at one time. ONI though, easily circumvented this blockade through the use of a cloaked Prowler and the magic of Slipspace travel.

The Prowler in question, _the UNSC Will-o-Wisp,_ had arrived in the Hegemony more than two weeks ago bearing a special cargo. In that time since, its crew had painstakingly monitored, tracked and recorded every single patrol route of every single fleet that came through this small sector of space. A task that its crew had only completed recently.

But the crew was efficient enough that once the two VIPs came aboard, Jella Korragan, and John-117 they had little to do. Most of the planning and other preparation for their arrival back in the Hegemony had already been done, nevertheless, John was a consummate professional, so he reviewed everything one more time with the few other Spartans accompanying him. Least, that was the crew assumed, since they were all clustered in a circle and in full armor. As for Jella herself, she a lot of time fantasizing about what she was eventually going to do to the leaders and servants of the Hegemony, and trying NOT to think about how much she wished her lover Cara was with her. Despite how much she told herself that it was for the best, for her, Cara and the kids, it didn't make that desire go away in the slightest.

'_Maybe once the shooting starts, then it'll set in.' _Jella thought to herself morosely.

John's thinking was focused on more practical matters. He knew that the remaining rebels and their supporters must be losing faith in the cause, thanks to all the losses and setbacks they had suffered as a result of Datak Korra's new policies. He, or rather Jella, had to prove that the rebels and their allies, namely the Office of Naval Intelligence, that the Rebellion was still strong and that the Hegemony still remained vulnerable.

Failing to do so, would mean the death of the Rebellion. You can give an army everything from weapons, to vehicles and even a navy. But if they lack the morale and will to fight, the enemy has already won half the battle. "Sir, do you really think we can pull this off?" John looked towards the Spartan who had asked the question. Carter-A259. The leader of Noble Team, a collection of Spartan-IIIs and one Spartan-II, he was a Spartan-III from the Alpha Company batch, the first of the Spartan-IIIs. John had chosen him to serve as his second on this return trip. "I've read all your reports, sir, and the situation looks grim."

"The odds may appear against us but its no worse than it was during many of our successful missions against the Covenant" John replied reassuringly.

Of course the Spartan Commander wasn't mentioning the elephant in the room. The fact that the UNSC had used its full resources to fight the Covenant. Even during their worst engagements, they still had access to a plethora of UNSC resources and a fleet aid as well. Whereas in

the battle against the Hegemony the Spartans were still effectively fighting with one hand tied behind their backs. Still, John was confident that he could achieve victory.

'_The Hegemony's numbers won't make a difference here.' _John thought, with regard to himself and his fellow Spartans. '_No matter what happens, we'll make it work.'_

But the Spartan Commander didn't have long to contemplate the issue. Because before long they arrived at their destination. The _UNSC Will-o-Wisp _having finally covered the distance between the edge of the Harsa system, to almost geosynchronous orbit around Khar'shan itself. None of the officers onboard came to notify him to head for the designated airlock, not that he need someone to. His HUD displaying the Prowlers progress and letting him know when they arrived. Carter following behind him as soon as his superior had stood up.

"Sir, you really think this plan is going to work?"

The plan was relatively simple: a D79H-TC 'Pelican' had been modified for stealth and attached to the underside of the Prowler. John and any non-crew members would board the Pelican and ride it down to the surface, with the Prowler leaving soon after. If all went right, they would be touching down on Khar'Shan's surface unmolested.

Least, that was half of the plan.

"I am." John replied with more than a touch of confidence as they reached the airlock. "We've used similar tactics against the Covenant before, and they have succeeded." Carter just nodded in acceptance while John opened the hatch leading into the Pelican itself.

Jella was already inside the Pelican, having gotten inside while John was still talking to his fellow Spartans. Aside from the batarian, the vehicle was loaded with enough weapons and other equipment to supply a small army. She tapped two fingers against her helmet in acknowledgment, her face hidden by the polarized visor of her gifted armor. John tapped his own helm in response. "Korragan, how's the armor?" She tapped the side of her helmet, signing that she either didn't know how to operate the radio, or it was broken. John thought that it was the former. "Get to the front and strap yourself in. I'll join you shortly." Jella just nodded and moved towards the front.

Just as John was about to move to the pilot's seat, Carter tapped him on the shoulder. "Sir, are you sure about this? I understand that she's an ally...but."

Carter was a loyal soldier, but he had been fighting aliens all his life. Moreover, like virtually all S-IIIs, he had been orphaned by the Covenant. So working with a non-human did not come easily.

"You can trust her, Carter." The tone in John's voice allowed for no argument. "She has nothing to gain, and everything to lose, if she were to betray us. She trusts us. And even if that were not the case, she knows that we are not someone she wants as an enemy."

Carter simply nodded, "Understood, sir." The issue finished for now, both Spartans moved towards the cockpit. John taking the pilot's

seat, with Carter taking the Co-pilots. Jella had taken the extra crash-seat overlooking both of them. "Spooling up the engine cores, all systems nominal." Carter started going over the pre-flight checklist. "Control systems responsive. All readouts acceptable. We are good to go, sir."

"Release docking clamps." As John flipped a switch, the entire frame of the Pelican, zero-gravity taking hold as they left the _Will-o-Wisp's _artificial gravity. The Prowler, as soon as the Pelican detached itself, 'rose' and turned away, leaving the three behind. Taking ahold of the controls, John directed the Pelican towards Khar'Shan.

Under most any circumstance, what they were attempting would be suicide. Flying into enemy airspace was one thing, but flying through an atmosphere meant that all the stealth modifications were worthless until they were below the atmosphere. Most circumstances, unless the Hegemony had more pressing matters to attend to. Just as the Pelican started skimming atmosphere, in the space just above geosync orbit, tiny silver-discs began popping into existence. Each smaller than even the smallest fighter, and from them pods began appearing. First one, then two, a small handful, their numbers growing as more discs winked in and out of existence.

To those on Khar'Shan, they seemed like nothing more than meteors. But John, Carter, and Jella knew better. Each and every single one of those pods held a Spartan.

When the decision had been made to return to Khar'Shan, John knew that he would need reinforcements, and a lot of them. There was no way he could bring the numbers he needed in dropships, it would take too long for what he needed. And besides, why hide their return?

Although the servants of the Hegemony had no idea what they were seeing at first. The drop pods looking like meteorites as they streaked across the sky. Heading towards the surface at lightning speed. A batarian soldier looked up as one of the foreign objects headed towards his position.

The private was technically on guard duty. But it had been a boring shift and the inexperienced wannabe warrior had fallen asleep. Coming awake just as the drop-pod was about to reach him, the shrieking noise as it fell waking him. Staring up to see over a ton of machine descending towards him.

But like many of the Spartans enemies, he never knew what hit him. The poor batarian splattering against the pod as it crashed into him, blood and ichor flash-vaporizing against it. Gore was splashed across the crater where the pod landed. Steam hissed from cracks as it opened, the door flying forward explosively. A hand grasping the edge as the occupant pulled itself out. "This is Spartan-B312. Touchdown confirmed, we are boots on the ground."

****APUFMKII****

" 'Demon', it was what we, the Covenant, called the Spartans during our war with the humans. A name given for their skill on the battlefield, and the dread they instilled in our less-hardened warriors. Unggoy and Kig-yar fled at their presence, legions were

felled by their hands alone. Death was their cloak, their aura. Only the most foolhardy did not regard them with caution, the most arrogant did not respect them. I pity those who face the Spartans, for they will quickly learn why even the Sangheili respect their ranks."

-Rtas 'Vadum, during a private, off the record, discussion about Spartans and their being called Demons.

Author' Note:

aDarkOne here:

I got the idea that asari can use their touch telepathy to take information from an unwilling mind based on how Benezia described the way that she violently 'took' the knowledge of the Mu Relay from the mind of the Rachni Queen in ME1.

But since such abilities are almost never mentioned again at all at in the Mass Effect trilogy (although in ME2 I get the impression that Morinth or and/or other ardat-yakshi might have similar abilities). Leading me to the conclusion that the ability to forcibly take information from the minds of others, is rare and/or extremely taboo amongst the asari.

Oddly enough I think the existence of asari like Eda Freja makes the blue space elves more like us. Because if humanity had telepathy I have no doubt that some humans would abuse it in a such a fashion (If normal Melding could be considered sex, then what Eda did to the cell leader was a violent rape).

For instance, ONI is clearly interested in the possibilities offered by touch telepathy. Now I don't want to give away too many spoilers here but I will say this:

The Office of Naval Intelligence is far from squeamish and will use every advantage and edge that they can get.

Follower38:

Not much for me to say, my cowriter has summed it mostly right. I won't say anything because I feel anything I can say would be spoilers. If anyone has any issues, leave it in a review or PM me, and I will get back to you. Otherwise, please leave a review of your thoughts. Also, there has been a spike recently of plagiarized works on the internet lately. Among the writers that I talk with, there was a noticeable rise. If any of you spot anything, please alert me. Until then, to quote Frankieonpc1080p, "I'll see you all, in the next chapter."

End
file.